

OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

ARCHDIOCESE OF WASHINGTON

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June 26, 2015

Dear Brother Priest,

The U.S. Supreme Court has issued a ruling that in effect redefines the civil definition of marriage nationwide. It has decided that every state must recognize “same-sex marriage” as a constitutional right. The law of the land affirms that “marriage” in civil law may now include two persons of the same sex. While this is not the Church’s understanding of marriage, it is a definition confirmed by the Court.

One concern with the new definition of marriage is that some Catholics may think that because the civil law definition of marriage has changed, so too has the Church’s teaching on what constitutes marriage. Another issue is that some people with a same-sex attraction may feel, after all the debate on sexuality and the true nature of marriage, that they are not welcome in the Church. Still others may wonder why Church teaching calls for a respect for each person but not approval of every lifestyle or activity. Then there are those who want to know more about the faith in order to participate better in discussions. How can we be well prepared to go out, as Pope Francis tells us, to engage and accompany people as we all try to draw closer to the Lord?

What does the Church teach about “marriage” and has it changed? The opening chapters of the Bible, the Book of Genesis, reveal to us the deepest truth about the nature of the human person and God’s plan for us. The revealed Word of God is still what it was before the Supreme Court decision. Marriage is the life-long union of a man and a woman given for the purpose of their mutual good and for the procreation and education of children. Sacred Scripture confirms this meaning of marriage and Jesus raised marriage to the dignity of a sacrament which means that, for the baptized, marriage is a sign and means of God’s grace. With the eyes of faith we see so much more when a man and a woman pledge their love to each other.

Our faith is not based on human preferences but the revealed Word of God. When some Pharisees were trying to test Jesus about marriage and divorce, our Lord said in reply, "Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'" (Matthew 19:4-5)? We cannot reinterpret Jesus' words. Married love is unique in God's plan for the bodily union of a husband and wife. The total gift of married love is unique because it requires the sexual difference that a man and woman bring to their union, each complementing the other and making them capable of and open to new life in the gift of children. In summary, the loving communion of persons that is marriage is meant to be faithful, fruitful and life-long.

Are people who share our faith but struggle with the Church's understanding about marriage still welcome at Church? Because Jesus came to save all people, all are invited to be a part of God's family – his Church. Faithful to her Lord and Founder, the Church welcomes everyone. It is the home for all who seek to follow Jesus as his disciple. This welcome is extended to everyone: married couples with children, unwed mothers and fathers, the single unmarried, couples who struggle with infertility, men and women with same-sex attraction, individuals facing gender issues, those whose marriages have broken down and suffered the trauma of divorce, people with special needs, immigrants, children born and unborn, the young, seniors, and the terminally ill, sinners and saints alike. If the Church were to welcome only those without sin, it would be empty. Catholic teaching exhorts every believer to treat all people with respect, compassion, sensitivity, and love. All are called to walk with Jesus and so all who try to do so have a place in the Church.

How then do we respond to those who say, "If you want to accept me, you must accept what I do?" Church teaching and common sense make a distinction between who a person is and what that person does. We are children of a loving God, made in his image and likeness. Thus we are worthy of respect. We are also called to follow God's plan and the moral law expressed, for example, in the Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount and the reflection on the Last Judgment (cf. Mark 10:17-21; Luke 18:18-22; Matthew 5, 6 and 7; Matthew 19:17-20; Matthew 25:31-46). Sacred Scripture and Church teaching call us both to recognize our human dignity and also to live according to God's plan.

The ancient Maxim "love the sinner but hate the sin" is central to our behavior because it refers to all human beings. The Lord asks us to "be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect," but he does so in reference to how we are to love one another (Matthew 5:48). In the Sacraments, he also gives us the grace

to do so. The Church has and always will meet people where they are to bring them closer to Christ.

At the same time, to condemn any sin is not discrimination against the person who commits the sin. Disagreement is not discrimination. We do not force people to agree with us, we ask to be granted the same freedom to hold our beliefs. Catholic teaching on human sexuality is the same for all. We are called to love God and love one another in truth (Matthew 22:36-40; Ephesians 4:15; Philippians 1:27; cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 24; *Caritas in Veritate*, 1-2; *Familiaris Consortio*, 11 et seq.).

What then is our responsibility in the face of all the changes in man-made civil law? We are followers of Jesus Christ, so our message must be what he proclaimed. All Christians have the responsibility to learn and to grow in their faith in order to share it with others. We should be able to explain what we believe and why we hold it. This means taking up the challenge to be better informed on Church teaching and why such belief is part of the vision rooted in Gospel values. This is all the more important when we find the teaching difficult.

We witness with our lives. Each one of us is called to an exalted standard of life and to be witnesses to the joy of the Gospel. As Jesus says, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). May the world see that to follow the Lord Jesus, to be a member of His Church, makes a difference.

In an effort to share the truth of marriage and promote enrichment and healing, the Office of Family Life is beginning the Visible Sign Campaign. You can visit www.VisibleSign.org to learn more about family life, sign up for the newsletter, and find a complete list of resources.

On a very practical level, there is a concern about the new definition of "spouse" and its legal ramifications. In this area for example, we must find a way to balance two important values, the provision of appropriate health care benefits for all Church personnel including their spouses, and the avoidance of the perception that by doing so we accept a definition of marriage and spouse contrary to faith and revealed truth.

For decades the bishops of the United States have insisted that access to decent health care is a basic safeguard of human life and an affirmation of human dignity from conception until natural death. They have advocated that health care

legislation should 1) ensure access to good quality, affordable health care for all; 2) retain longstanding requirements that organizations not be forced to pay for elective abortions or plans that include them, and 3) effectively protect conscience rights. We continue in this tradition.

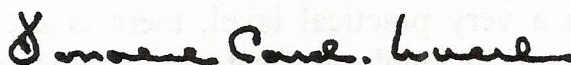
The Archdiocese of Washington has a long and recognized history of serving all people across this metropolitan area in education, health care, social services, outreach to the poor and needy and collaboration with all people of good will in building up the common good. We remain convinced that it is precisely by being true to our Catholic identity that we can continue to help realize a truly good and just society where all enjoy the benefits of peace, prosperity and freedom.

These reflections come with the hope that we try clearly to respect the law of the land and its implications and at the same time we are equally clear on our understanding of marriage and what it means in the light of the Gospel. As our Holy Father, Pope Francis, reminds us, we are all sinners but sinners who have been embraced with the mercy of God and we must therefore all try to find a way of accompanying one another as we make our way through life and try in the light of the Church's teaching to draw ever more close to the Lord Jesus.

We, as shepherds of God's flock, can with great serenity affirm that whatever the civil law determines does not change for us our understanding of Jesus' Gospel and our commitment in our own lives to live out that truth to the best of our ability. My hope is that you might find occasion to share, in whatever manner you feel appropriate, the content of this letter with those entrusted to your pastoral care.

With every personal good wish, I am

Faithfully in Christ,



Archbishop of Washington