



November 2017

Statement re Same Sex Marriage Survey Result

There are no mere coincidences in the life of Faith.

This is a remark I often make with the weekday readings at Mass in the Cathedral. Frequently the set Scriptures fit so well with the news events of that day.

So too with this weekend's first reading *A perfect wife*¹ – *who can find her?* (Proverbs 31/10)

This comes at the end of a week when Australians voted in the postal survey about two to one (2 to 1) in favour of Same Sex Marriage.

Then there is the middle verse of the psalm:

*Your wife like a fruitful vine
in the heart of your house;
Your children like shoot of the olive,
around your table (Ps 127- 1-5)*

Those of us who voted 'NO' now find ourselves in a minority – yet not an insignificant minority. Interestingly in some more religious and ethnically diverse electorates there were atypical 'NO' votes (Blaxland, NSW records 73.9% 'NO').

I have written two long reflections, (in all over eight thousand (8,000) words), on this complex issue.

My own view is that the 'NO' case became distracted by fears about religious freedoms.

That wedding cake maker did not particularly help the cause: who but a trouble maker, from half way across the U.S.A. in this case so often cited, would want an unfriendly confectioner fiddling with their matrimonial festivities?

Rather, we would have done much better highlighting what is at the very heart of marriage: that rich but strange complementarity of differences at almost every level between wife and husband.

So *where to from here* for us?

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¹ My mother, who hated sewing, always found this reading hard to take: *She is always busy with wool and flax, she does her work with eager hands.* (Proverbs 31/13) perhaps like many other women she was somewhat *put off* by this idealised *goodie two shoes* wife!!)

Firstly, and fundamentally as Christians, we must respect and not resent those who are not in agreement with us.

The Other may not be some distant, abstract figure.

As I have written before, there is probably not a family, not a friendship network and not a parish community that does not have and embrace people who find themselves attracted to others of the same gender.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church could not be clearer on this question of respect.

The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. (2358)

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Secondly, the result of this survey and legislation which will allow for Same Sex Marriages, does not overturn or change in any way traditional Catholic teaching and practice on the Sacrament of Marriage.

This is not to claim that we are somehow *outside* or *above the law*. This is a crucial point which has been overlooked in this discussion.

I wrote letters to local and national newspapers on exactly this point – but they have not been published. So I will reproduce their main points here:

For most of recorded history marriage has been a religious institution celebrated in a church, synagogue or mosque. In more recent centuries the wedding event may have been noted in a religious register.

In less literate times two other people were required as the eye and ear witnesses to the exchange of vows. This was the original purpose of the bride's maid and the best man.

It was only with the development of the bureaucratic state in the 19th century that governments became involved in marriage by having standardised recording systems for all weddings celebrated in their jurisdiction.

In Australia clergy are authorised to register or record the fact that they have celebrated a marriage – in my own case *According to the Rites of the Catholic Church*.

I am not a civil celebrant. I am not obliged nor can I be compelled to celebrate a marriage which does not accord with the Catholic understanding of marriage.

So, for example, I may not marry a couple, neither of whom are Catholics. Nor may I marry a divorced person unless their first marriage has been annulled by a Church tribunal. (Judaism and Islam have similar procedures.)

So too, *according to the Rites of the Catholic Church*, I could not be obliged to celebrate and record a union between two people of the same gender.

I hope this may clarify at least one aspect of this current, complex and divisive issue.

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Thirdly, we may all need to take a *deep breath*, and if necessary a *cold shower*, after all this heated debate.

There has been much talk of *hate speech*.

In a well-functioning democratic system, like our own, the views of the majority do determine the laws of the land.

Yet there is a significant difference between a political consensus and moral certainty.

Our own personal moral thinking and acting may take us above and beyond the *black letters* of the Law or the prevailing political consensus.

For example, in our country there is no law against fornication (sex outside of marriage). Yet Christian and other religious and ethical traditions do stand against such casual sexual encounters.

Jesus' own teaching on this received fuller formulation in St. Paul's writings: Christian faith takes us beyond the Law.

Laws may well (but rather badly!) change on life issues such as abortion and euthanasia.

However such changes in the law do not change our own consciences and our religious moral responses.

Such legal changes though do both reflect and influence – for good or ill - *the moral tone* of the society in which we live – as will the impending Same Sex Marriage legislation.

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Fourthly and finally, we find ourselves having to live with or at least to live among change.

For more than four (4) decades now in Australia we have had *no fault divorce*. A marriage may be dissolved after a mere twelve (12) months of separation. This country may have been a world first in such easy divorce. The divorce rate has certainly risen. So too have the number of couples who live together and never want to enter the married state.

While this may challenge, it does not change our commitment to life and love.

Just we have never been obliged to preach *easy divorce*, nor would our schools be compelled to advocate Same Sex Marriage, or Euthanasia or Abortion on demand should they be legalized.

In our own lifetimes we have *lived in* and now *live outside* of an at least nominally Christian society. We no longer enjoy *moral majority* status.

The postal survey, and the latest Commonwealth census on (non) religious affiliation, have clearly numerically evidenced that shift in attitudes and beliefs.

As a young priest doing parish home visitation in the early 1970s you were often politely told: *We don't go to Mass (or Church) anymore but we still live Christian lives.*

To this, the wise old parish priest I was with prophesied: *One generation will give up the practice of the Faith – the next generation will give up on its Morals!*

A fellow bishop, a student of history, keeps reminding us at Conference that *Christendom is over.*

There is no more and, probably, there never was a perfect Christian society or a generally agreed and adhered to moral order.

This clarification in belief systems and in moral behaviors will make Christian living more challenging and yet, ironically, more easily defined as we move from vague and lazy majority status.

+ James Foley
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