

## JOURNALIST GREG SHERIDAN & AUSTRALIA'S BISHOPS

“I, the Light, have come into the world so that they who believe in me may live in the darkness no longer.”

*John 12 : 46*

On 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2016, yet another Catholic public figure, Greg Sheridan, in *The Australian* newspaper, publicly rejected the stand of Christ's Church on marriage as he lent support to the secular mood which grounds the call for 'same-sex' marriage. (*Appendix I*) No response has yet been made by any Australian bishop.

In March 2012, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference ('ACBC') lodged a submission with a House of Representatives Standing Committee considering legislation for 'same-sex' marriage in which its members purported to defend the Catholic position. Their argument is encapsulated in their Summary which we have set forth in *Appendix II*. (The full submission may be viewed at <https://www.catholic.org.au/acbc-media/downloads/public-policy/1302-acbc-submission-marriage-equality-and-marriage-bills-march-2012-1/file> ) It is an inadequate, not to say ineffectual, statement of the Catholic Church's position.

Its chief, and fundamental, defect is its adoption of a nominalist (and subjectivist) mode of reasoning which, ignoring metaphysical and theological principle, implies that the essence of marriage is something about which there may be differing opinions. This is manifest in its expressed concern over the altering of marriage's legal 'definition' by a state legislator (the Commonwealth Government).

The institution of marriage is not from will, but from nature. It is not something at which men arrive, or contrive among themselves, but an immutable reality instituted by the Author of nature to complement His creature, man. This is spelled out specifically in His teaching by Christ Our Lord (cf. *Matthew 19 : 3-9*). The essence of marriage is beyond man's power to alter and no arguing among men, or human lawmaker can change it. One looks in vain in the submission for any mention of Christ, Truth himself, or any mention of His authorship of creation, or indeed of anything that He had to say on marriage.

One would think a bishop, sworn to uphold Christ's reign on earth as in heaven, would ground any public statement he made on the topic of marriage with what God himself has revealed.

The submission speaks of love, but with banality. It does not advert to the Divinely revealed principle that all creation was made in love by the God of love, that each of his creatures reflects that love, particularly man whom God made in His own image and likeness. It neglects to show how marriage was instituted by God as the perfection of human love, or to detail God's revelation—so highly does He value marriage—that it serves as a metaphor for the love He bears for men, and of the love Christ bears for his Church.

Marriage is not a union “that might produce children”, as the bishops assert deprecatingly. It is the institution whose end, *whose whole reason for existence*, is the reproduction, development and education

of children. At the heart of the bishops' attritional approach is a false understanding of the primary end of marriage, a consequence of fifty years of deference to Protestant compromise on marriage. Moreover, the Church's position on marriage is not founded "on human ecology", as the bishops assert, but on her right understanding of human nature, something of which the modern episcopacy seem largely to be ignorant.

The submission addresses the disorders that can occur in human loves but neglects to advert to the reason underlying the tendency, original sin, the one element of Catholic doctrine, as Chesterton remarked, which is experimentally verifiable. The bishops omitted the opportunity to spell out the essential disorder in the homosexual inclination, destructive of the good of individuals who embrace it, and of any society in which it flourishes, no matter what people might think to the contrary, and no matter either that those engaged in a homosexual relationship might seem to manifest "a genuine loving relationship".

Whether through clumsiness, or ignorance, the bishops give the impression that government enjoys a certain autonomy. This is a reversal of metaphysical reality. Government does not precede, it follows, man the individual, the family and society. Its only justification is to do those things which individual men cannot do for themselves, such as ordering public goods and ensuring the common good by laying down laws that reflect the moral law. Insofar as government neglects the right ordering of family life—in which the true understanding of marriage is essential—it fails in its mandate.

This, and the truth that any 'law' that would seek to alter the nature of marriage would be utterly ineffectual as regards the reality, but cause extensive harm through the abuse of the teaching function of public legislation, ought to have been the primary focus of the bishops' submission.

The bishops embrace the terminology of compromise, repeatedly using the expression 'same sex marriage' as if it represented reality when it is nothing more than a neologism of the ideologically committed. The submission is defensive and apologetic, using weak and secondary arguments in lieu of arguments addressing the essential issues. To any orthodox Catholic it is weak and unsatisfying. One can only wonder how its lack of appeal to the objective truths about marriage would affect non Catholics.

In *Appendix III* we set forth a draft defence of the Church's position embracing principle and the Church's metaphysics which a Catholic bishop might use as in answer to Mr Sheridan.

But can we expect any Australian bishop to break ranks with the ACBC ?

Given the poor example provided by Australia's bishops, Mr Sheridan's abandonment of Catholic principle is, while not excusable, to some extent understandable.

Michael Baker

21<sup>st</sup> April, 2016—*St Anselm, Bishop and Doctor of the Church*

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## *APPENDIX I*

### **GAY COUPLES WITH CHILDREN DESERVE OUR BLESSING**

Greg Sheridan

On Monday, on ABC's television Q & A, I made two confessions.

One was that I am a believing Catholic. Though spectacularly unsatisfactory in every way irregular in my practice, far from diligent in observation, guilty of countless derelictions, not remotely bound in public policy by church positions or any such, I do actually believe in the Catholic Church and its message.

I believe it is true and I believe it is good.

At the same time, I now think the state should recognise same- sex marriages.

How can I reconcile these two positions?

I no longer think there is any serious case for the state to enforce the Catholic, or more broadly Christian, traditional view of marriage.

One of the benefits of the government's decision to hold a plebiscite on this is the way it has forced many people, myself included, to think through the issue more deeply than before.

At one level the argument is predominantly symbolic. Civil unions now have more or less the same legal rights as marriages.

I don't underrate symbols. But the most important question of substance, not the only question but the most important one, is children. It is widely accepted now that gay couples have children.

Whether these children come from previous marriages or relationships, IVF treatments, adoptions or whatever, plenty of children are growing up with gay parents.

So the most important question is what is best for the kids.

The best thing for the children is that their parents be in a committed, stable relationship. If legal marriage reinforces that, then that's a social good.

Similarly for the adults themselves. If they want to make a commitment to a relationship and bring it extra legal sanction, I can't see why the state should deny that any longer.

The arguments for the traditional view are substantial, and people who hold them should not be branded as homophobic or bigoted unless they actually express homophobic or bigoted views.

The only real danger to legalising gay marriage is that it may lead to some restriction on religious freedom. This is not the nonsensical non-issue of Christian clerics being forced to solemnise marriages they don't approve of. That will never happen.

The much likelier danger is that our often counter-productive human rights bureaucracies will deem it an offence for people to propound traditional Christian teaching. That would be wrong. It is only in that one specific area I think really ugly polarisation could come about.

There should be some general protection for the churches. If the proponents of same-sex marriage are smart enough to accommodate this level of religious freedom, I don't think this reform should cause any

distressing social polarisation at all.

Malcolm Turnbull is right to ask participants in this debate to speak with some civility to each other. Whenever you are dealing with someone's identity, or their deepest religious beliefs, it is surely not too much to ask for some modicum of respect.

What then of the churches?

I am not asking them to change their own doctrines or their own practices. Doctrine can and does evolve but that is not my argument in this case. I think the churches do themselves a disservice by trying to hang on to the very few specifically Christian enforcement elements of an ambient culture of long ago, at least a half-century or more, when the culture explicitly acknowledged its Christian inspiration and the attempt to form institutions in accordance with Christian norms.

No Western society was ever really a Christian society. But past injustices don't invalidate Christian inspiration ; they invalidate, or show the weakness of, the efforts to implement the inspiration. And in any modern, secular state, of course, religion should be a matter of conscience within the bounds of the normal law.

Churches are mistaken to try to hang on to old elements of legal enforcement of a bygone social orthodoxy. The empty pews of the Anglican Church in England show how little that offers, how sterile an approach to contemporary life that is.

Of course, Christian activists don't see themselves as trying to hang on to institutional privilege but rather as defending basic social goods.

I have the greatest sympathy with them. I think the failing of traditional Christianity across the Western world is the greatest single cultural crisis we face. It is very much an open question whether a civilisation can survive without transcendent belief.

But the churches would be much better to recognise themselves as minorities in Western society and indeed to demand minority rights. They need to advocate for the Christian vision of the good life but not primarily through legal enforcement.

Already a huge proportion of the marriages the state recognises are not approved marriages as far as some churches are concerned.

Catholic orthodoxy has it that normally you cannot remarry after divorce. For a long time Ireland enforced this prohibition.

But now that society has accepted no-fault divorce, it's up to Christians to propound their vision of marriage through means other than the law. If they wanted to they could engage in their own voluntary legal arrangements beyond those of the state. There is no prospect at all of the state taking things back to the old days for them. And in reality that's not the state's job anyway.

Some arguments some Christians make against gay marriage I positively disagree with.

The talk of a "stolen generation" being made up of children in gay couples because they are not with both their biological parents is an attack really on all non-biological parents. It's a bad attack.

I have always been a million per cent supporter of adoption, interracial adoption, any kind of adoption. The only criterion for being a good parent is to love the child unreservedly.

In Christian tradition nothing is more powerful than the Holy Family—Joseph, Mary and Jesus. Central to the story of the incarnation is the fact Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus. I find the example of Joseph a profound inspiration to all stepfathers.

This is not a theological interpretation. It's merely the inspiration I find in the gospels, a source I generally never quote in political discussion.

We have to recognise that we live in an essentially post-Christian society. The legal and religious institutions of marriage should part company.

That's a challenge for religious folks—to try to live up to their ideals and win people to these ideals. And it's an opportunity for others to fashion as good a life as they might.

*The Australian*, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2016

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## *APPENDIX II*

Submission  
to the House of Representatives Standing Committee  
on Social Policy and Legal Affairs inquiry into  
the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2012 and the Marriage Amendment Bill 2012

### **Summary**

The Catholic Church (the Church) is concerned with all that impacts on human wellbeing.

The Church makes this submission to support continuing to define marriage as the exclusive and permanent union of a woman and a man. It strongly opposes changing the definition to include same sex marriages.

Gay people should be treated with respect and compassion, but that is not the same as allowing the institution of marriage to be changed. Changing the meaning of marriage to something which it is not discriminates against all those who have entered into marriages and are faithful to that commitment, whether for one, ten, thirty or fifty years.

The Church recognises that people of the same sex can have deep and loving friendships, but the Church strongly holds that these friendships cannot lead to marriage because of the particular nature and role of marriage.

The reason governments have an interest in marriage is because it is a union that might produce children. Governments promote stable marriages because they are important to the welfare of children and because marriages and families are key to the future of the community.

Families are small communities in themselves on which the wider community is built and they are the main place in which children are socialised to take their place in the wider community.

The Church recognises that women and men are equal in dignity but different, not only in their physical attributes but also spiritually and psychologically. Though different, there is a complementarity between men and women that allows a sexual union.

Not all genital acts between a woman and a man are procreative but all imply the possibility of procreation.

While a same sex couple might have a genuinely loving relationship, the ability of marriage between a man and a woman to lead naturally to children, prompting the state's interest in the welfare of children resulting from those unions, cannot be found in same sex marriages.

The Church agrees there should not be unjust discrimination against same sex attracted people. But it is not unjust to point out the special nature of marriage, that Submission 013 3 same sex marriages would be quite different and to argue that given the two relationships are quite different, they therefore should not be called the same thing.

It is important that children have access to both a mother and a father, and while many families struggle to do their very best with a single parent, governments should not decide as a matter of policy that this should be a new norm.

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### APPENDIX III

## DRAFT OF A CATHOLIC RESPONSE

Catholic journalist Greg Sheridan's recent article defending 'same-sex marriage' ('Gay Couples With Children Deserve Our Blessing', *The Australian*, 7<sup>th</sup> April 2016) involves a number of misconceptions, fruit of his attempt to do the impossible, to reconcile the teaching of Christ with secular demands.

The first misunderstands the provenance of marriage. Men and women have married since they first appeared on the face of the earth—since Adam and Eve. They did not, in ages past, need authority to marry from king or lord. Nor, in the present age, do they need the authority of an Act or regulation of parliament, no matter what any posited 'law' may claim to the contrary. Almighty God who created every man and woman and sustains them in existence gives the authority that goes with their nature.

*Whether* a man and a woman marry is a matter of will. But the state they embrace is beyond will. It is of nature. Moreover, it is not a marriage celebrant—not even a Catholic priest—who marries them. They marry each other.

The Almighty instituted marriage for the welfare of the human race to provide the only fit setting for the procreation, development and education of children. The Catholic Church has upheld the institution over twenty centuries. As Christ Our Lord said : “This is why a man must leave father and mother and cling to his wife and the two become one body. They are no longer two, therefore, but one body. What God has joined together, then, man must not divide.” [*Matthew* 19 : 5-6] The family is, moreover, the seminary of citizens of heaven.

The recognition of these realities was quite clear to all the world until, 500 years ago, Henry VIII decided to arrogate to himself authority over marriage by forcing parliament to declare he had never been married to his Queen, so he could 'marry' his mistress. The virus of thought that man can subject marriage to human will has been with us ever since. It is the root cause of the current press for 'same-sex' marriage. Conjugal union is of the essence of marriage. That union is impossible for homosexuals.

The state only exists to uphold the natural physical and moral law, to serve the good of the individual, of the family and of society. Notwithstanding what may be claimed, no state has power which goes beyond ensuring marriage is conducted in an orderly fashion and its demands as regards consent, competence and

impediment are met and its celebration recorded.

Of all the religions on earth, one only was established by God, the Catholic religion, whose founder and head is Jesus Christ. The Catholic Church is God's Church founded for the salvation of men. For fifty years now a burgeoning atheism has sought to reduce this religion to secular demands. The calls for 'same-sex' marriage are one simply more element of the atheistic program.

Mr Sheridan says society has accepted “no-fault divorce”. Divorce, with or without fault, can only work harm—*it works harm daily*—in the lives of men and women and their children.

Mr Sheridan says “[t]here is no prospect at all of the state taking things back to the old days for [Christians]. And in reality that’s not the state’s job anyway.” He is nowhere more in error than here. It *is* the state's job to uphold marriage and its rights, as it is its job to uphold the rights of the individual. Insofar as it fails in these tasks, it fails in its very *raison d'être*.

For Mr Sheridan it would seem “the old days” are the bad old days. But the very contrary is the case: they were the good old days, the days when marriage's demands were, in the large, accepted, and society was, as largely, free of disorder, promiscuity and drug abuse its abandonment has brought. Moreover, a return to natural principle is not impossible. No man is beyond redemption, no matter how evil his life. Nor is society. But it requires a reasoned rejection of the secular and atheistic mentality which stifles our society.

To address the various arguments Mr Sheridan has put—

- First, since the state's only reason for existence is to uphold the natural moral law, it does not have power to recognise same-sex 'marriages' (as neither has it ever had the power to dissolve marriages rightly contracted).
- Nor will a plebiscite give the state power to do so, since marriage is not of human will, whether individual or collective. (Just as a law commanding the tides to cease to run would be utterly ineffectual, so will any law that commands marriage to conform to human will.)
- Thirdly, the best provision for any child is that provided through marriage because the child shares in the make-up of its parents : there is a natural inclination to love what is a part of one.
- Fourthly, insofar as they uphold natural moral principle, 'the churches' are not, as he asserts, “mistaken to try to hang on to old elements of legal enforcement of a bygone social orthodoxy”. Rather, do they share—some more, some less—in the principles laid down by God's Church which is the only true bulwark against a burgeoning social disorder.

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Mr Sheridan's reasoning lacks coherence. While he is of the view that “the failing of traditional Christianity across the Western world is the greatest single cultural crisis we face”, that it is moot “whether a civilisation can survive without transcendent belief”, he insists “the churches”—read “the Catholic Church”—should abandon the demand that society conform with moral principle. The Church God founded for man's salvation should abandon the struggle against the atheistic imperative. This will not happen !

At the heart of his arguments is the subjectivist principle that truth is determined not by reality but by what people think. It is reality that marriage is from nature, as it is reality that man was created by God and is radically dependent on Him. Subjectivism in contrast, asserts that man can determine marriage by an act

of will as, by an act of will, he can deny there is a God, or a natural order, or that man was created for an eternal end.

It is a matter of great regret and of scandal that, notwithstanding his baptism, Mr Sheridan has seen fit to abandon the Catholic position in favour of the atheistic.

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