

Marriage is important: be informed before you vote

Pastoral Statement by Bishop Michael Smith



Later this month, the people of Ireland are invited to vote on a proposed amendment to the section in the Constitution entitled 'The Family'. The Constitution belongs to the people of the Nation. The choice we are asked to make in the Marriage Referendum on 22 May is a decision that only the people can make. It rests with neither politicians nor bishops. All of us, therefore, need to reflect carefully; we need to inform ourselves on the central issues before deciding how we will vote.

The bishops have already issued a statement saying *'Marriage is important - reflect before you change it'*. We respect the views of people who think differently to us, trusting that our sincerely held views will also be heard and respected. I wish here to outline my own concerns about the proposal now before the people.

Homosexual people living in Ireland have undoubtedly suffered discrimination over the years. I very much welcome, therefore, the measures adopted in recent years to address this injustice. In this regard also, the values of the Gospel make compellingly clear to us the dignity of every human person, and that all must be treated equally and with respect.

The specific proposal to amend the Constitution is about the people's understanding of marriage and family life. I accept that addressing inequality is undeniably an obligation on society. My particular and deep-rooted concern, however, is that the current proposal introduces a profound change into our understanding of marriage, of the family and of parenthood. The proposal, taken together with the provisions of the *Children and Family Relationships Bill*, removes the mention of 'mother' and 'father' from a whole range of existing legislation. Denying children the right to a mother and a father is not, I believe, an appropriate way to address the question of inequality in our society.

Recent comments by Government Ministers, and others supporting the proposal, suggest that they no longer believe that there is a special value in a child having the love of a mother and a father, or that men and women bring something distinct or unique to the lives of their children. They seem to believe that gender does not matter. These comments affirm the view that when you redefine marriage, you redefine the family and you redefine the very meaning of parenthood.

The current debate is often presented as a clash between Church and State. Respecting our Constitution, we must avoid seeing the issue in this very blinkered manner. The Church's beliefs around the Sacrament of Marriage are not at issue and will not change regardless of the outcome of the Referendum.

The Constitution, first and foremost, serves the whole of society and the common good. The people are being asked to put aside the understanding of marriage and family life that pre-dates both Church and State. Marriage and family life have served society well for thousands of years, providing a committed relationship between a man and a woman for the upbringing and care of their children. To change the meaning of marriage would seem an extraordinary rejection of what is good for society.

It is regrettable that both the proposal to amend the Constitution and the *Children and Family Relationships Bill* were adopted by the Dáil without any substantial debate. Changing a major article of our Constitution merits detailed consideration since unforeseen consequences so often arise. The family is described by our Constitution '*as the natural, primary and fundamental unit group of society*'. Once again, I repeat the message from the bishops: '*Marriage is important - reflect before you change it*'. I do not think that there is anything offensive in believing, as we have always done, that marriage is a permanent union between a man and a woman. The search for equality in our society will not be advanced by undermining the very cornerstone on which a just and stable society is built.