



The Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC) represents the Catholic Bishops of Washington State: Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of the Archdiocese of Seattle; Bishop Blase J. Cupich of the Diocese of Spokane; Bishop Joseph J. Tyson of the Diocese of Yakima; and Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

MARRIAGE AND THE GOOD OF SOCIETY

A Pastoral statement regarding Referendum 74

On November 6 the people of Washington State will vote on Referendum 74, a ballot measure with far-reaching significance. Voters will be asked to “approve” or “reject” a new law that legalizes marriage between couples of the same sex. This public policy debate is due in part to historic patterns of injustice toward persons with same-sex attraction. Thus, for many, the desire to redefine marriage has its origins in compassion for friends and family members who have experienced bias, unjust discrimination and personal rejection for their sexual orientation. As pastors and the bishops of Washington State, we are sensitive to this suffering and reaffirm our commitment to protect and defend the dignity of every human person. We also affirm the Church’s consistent teaching that marriage can only be the union of one man and one woman.

The Purpose of Marriage

In light of its divine origins and the teaching of Jesus, the Church has always understood that marriage — in addition to its sacramental nature — is a social contract. Marriage is the foundational unit of human society, because it exists for the good of husband and wife and the strengthening of their unique, permanent, and faithful bond of love. In addition, because human sexuality orders the transmission of human life through man and woman, children “are part of the glory of marriage,” as St. Augustine wrote many centuries ago. Marriage is founded on sexual difference and ordered toward the fulfillment of husband and wife and the procreation and rearing of children. This basic understanding of marriage and family is “built in” to the very nature of man and woman. No matter how well-intentioned, the effort to redefine marriage in civil law to include people of the same sex will not serve the good of society because it would detach marriage from its essential character and purpose. Furthermore, the redefinition of marriage does not bestow any new legal rights on couples of the same-sex in Washington State. In 2009 a law was passed that granted to registered domestic partners every legal benefit enjoyed by couples in traditional marriages.

Marriage and Children

Civil marriage law exists to promote the best environment for the health, welfare and education of children. Approval of Referendum 74 would subordinate the union of children with their mother and father to a legal entitlement for adults. By separating marriage from procreation and the responsibility of men and women to raise children that result from their sexual union, the new marriage law would abandon the state’s principal interest in this time-honored institution. If the state successfully disconnects marriage from the potential inherent to sexual union between a man and woman, the civil meaning of marriage will be lost, and the institution that results will be a genderless contract without reference to children. The foundational nature of marriage for the good and the strength of human society will be harmed beyond repair. Faithful, monogamous marriages between one man and one

woman will cease to be the legally-established social standard for uniting children with their parents, even though social science has established that children do best when raised in homes with married mothers and fathers.

Marriage Law and Religious Liberty

In addition, the legal separation of marriage from procreation would have a chilling effect on religious liberty and the right of conscience. Once marriage is redefined as a genderless contract, it will become legally discriminatory for public and private institutions such as schools to promote the unique value of children being raised by mothers and fathers. No institution or individual could propose that married mothers and fathers provide a singular benefit to children without being accused of discrimination. Recent attacks on churches, businesses and nonprofit organizations that express their conscientious objection to the redefinition of marriage underscore the danger. Those who uphold families based on the permanent, faithful relationship between a married man and woman as the best environment for raising children already have been accused of hate speech, and the right of religious institutions to freely practice their faith has been abridged.

Conclusion

As teachers and Church leaders, we reaffirm the need to recognize and defend the rights of all people. However, redefining marriage as a means of dealing with important issues of equality and respect for persons with same-sex attraction will not achieve this goal and would overturn centuries of common law. We are deeply concerned about equality, justice and the good of society and the family. Our support for traditional marriage is not born of bias or intolerance toward anyone. Instead, our purpose is to support the legal definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman in order to promote the common good. We therefore urge Catholic people to uphold our consistent teaching on marriage for the good of the Church, society, spouses and their children. Finally, we *reject* the redefinition of marriage as a “civil contract between two persons.”

We are hopeful the vote on Referendum 74 will be an opportunity to debate this important social issue in an atmosphere of respect, honesty and conviction. As Americans, we have the freedom to debate public policy matters freely and publicly, and we pray that our dialogue will be marked by civility and clarity. We submit these reflections in hopes that they will contribute to such a dialogue and assist Catholic people in forming their consciences on Referendum 74.