



Bishop's Office
5 Lyons Street South
Ballarat VIC 3350

P.O. Box 121
Ballarat VIC 3353

Phone: (03) 5337 7121
Fax: (03) 5332 1122

E-mail: bishop@ballarat.catholic.org.au

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Dear Friends,

For some time now, people have been discussing a proposal to change the legal definition of marriage. In this context, I would like to recall some reflections on marriage from the writings of Pope Francis. In particular, I would like to refer to some observations Pope Francis made in a document he issued last year, entitled *The Joy of Love: On Love in the Family*. This document followed the extensive discussions in two synods held in Rome on the topic of the family.

In a wide-ranging treatment of the joys and challenges experienced by families today, Pope Francis gives a special place to the union of a man and a woman that bears fruit in new life. He refers to the benefits that can come to society through the family founded on such a union. By contrast, he refers to the loss that can come when the family founded on marriage is weakened.

“No one can think that the weakening of the family as that natural society founded on marriage will prove beneficial to society as a whole. The contrary is true: it poses a threat to the mature growth of individuals, the cultivation of community values and the moral progress of cities and countries. There is a failure to realise that only the exclusive and indissoluble union between a man and a woman has a plenary role to play in society as a stable commitment that bears fruit in new life.” (*The Joy of Love*, paragraph 52)

Pope Francis recognises the many kinds of family situations there are and that these can offer a certain stability, but he distinguishes them from the family founded on marriage. “We need to acknowledge the great variety of family situations that can offer a certain stability, but de facto or same-sex unions, for example, may not simply be equated with marriage. No union that is temporary or closed to the transmission of life can ensure the future of society.” (Paragraph 52)

Pope Francis then refers to the changes in law in a number of countries that have promoted alternatives to marriage in the traditional sense, leading to “a legal deconstruction of the family”. The Pope encourages a critical review of older forms of marriage but says that this should not lead to the belittling of marriage itself but rather to its renewal.

“In various countries, legislation facilitates a growing variety of alternatives to marriage, with the result that marriage, with its characteristics of exclusivity, indissolubility and openness to life, comes to appear as an old-fashioned and outdated option. Many countries are witnessing a legal deconstruction of the family, tending to adopt models based almost exclusively on the autonomy of the individual will. Surely it is legitimate and right to reject older forms of the traditional family marked by authoritarianism and even violence, yet this should not lead to a disparagement of marriage itself, but rather to the rediscovery of its authentic meaning and its renewal.” (Paragraph 53)

Later in the document, in a section entitled "The love of a mother and a father", Pope Francis writes of the complementary contributions a mother and a father can make to the upbringing of a child. He writes, "Every child has a right to receive love from a mother and a father; both are necessary for a child's integral and harmonious development." (Paragraph 172) He then quotes the Australian Bishops on this subject. "As the Australian Bishops have observed, each of the spouses 'contributes in a distinct way to the upbringing of a child. Respecting a child's dignity means affirming his or her need and natural right to have a mother and a father'. We are speaking not simply of the love of father and mother as individuals, but also of their mutual love, perceived as the source of one's life and the solid foundation of the family." The Pope sees the mother and father as reflecting the motherly and fatherly face of God. "They show their children the maternal and paternal face of the Lord. Together they teach the value of reciprocity, of respect for differences and of being able to give and take." (Paragraph 172)

We are well aware that children are sometimes cared for by just one of their parents. In such cases the parent can show immense dedication and skill in looking after their family. We rightly admire the wonderful achievements of a parent in this situation. However, Pope Francis still speaks of a "loss" involved when one parent is not present and he recommends efforts to compensate for this loss as far as possible. "If for some inevitable reason one parent should be lacking, it is important to compensate for this loss, for the sake of the child's healthy growth to maturity." (Paragraph 72)

Pope Francis is recognised as someone who shows a deep respect for each person. He has often spoken of the need for the Church to be close to people and walk with them in the complexity of their daily lives. In one often-quoted comment, he said that he would not judge homosexual persons who are searching for God and seeking to do what is good. Yet, this respect for each person and this sensitivity to people's different situations does not prevent the Pope from highlighting what he sees as the special value of marriage as the union of a man and a woman that is open to conceiving and nurturing children.

Pope Francis refers to marriage as the union of a man and a woman, "with its characteristics of exclusivity, indissolubility and openness to life" (Paragraph 53). In other words, he sees marriage as a unique and abiding commitment of a man and woman to one another, and a commitment that is open to bringing children into the world.

While he shows great respect for every person and recognises the goodness in the many relationships in people's lives, Pope Francis encourages us to have a special regard for the particular relationship involved in the union of a man and a woman that is open to new life. He considers that this particular relationship can contribute much to individuals and to society as a whole. It is appropriate that this particular relationship has a particular name. The name the Pope uses is "marriage".

God bless you all.



Paul Bird CSsR

Bishop of Ballarat