

"Preserving what is deep, good and valid in our own heritage"

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At the arrival ceremony in Toronto for the late Pope John Paul II at the beginning of World Youth Day 2002, the Holy Father spoke these powerful words to Government officials and the people of Canada at Pearson International Airport on July 23, 2002:

"Canadians are heirs to an extraordinarily rich humanism, enriched even more by the blend of many different cultural elements... . In a world of great social and ethical strains, and confusion about the very purpose of life, Canadians have an incomparable treasure to contribute - on condition that they preserve what is deep, and good and valid in their own heritage."

The Parliament of Canada has voted to alter the definition it gives to marriage for the purposes of Canadian civil law. This decision could bring in its wake bitter and unpredictable demographic, social, cultural, and religious consequences.

The Vatican has called recent government measures in Spain and Canada legalizing same-sex marriage "new, violent attacks against the family." Spain's Parliament approved a bill June 30 to allow same-sex couples to marry and adopt children; Canada's Parliament approved legislation legalizing same-sex marriage two days earlier. The laws passed in Canada and Spain are expected to go into effect later this month. The Netherlands and Belgium passed similar laws allowing gay marriages in 2001 and 2003, respectively. Until now, only Spain allows for the adoption of children by married gay couples.

With Bill C-38 now proceeding to the Senate of Canada, and in view also of ongoing developments in the health-care crisis, Canadians continue to witness a dangerous deterioration of their communal values. This worrisome decline in shared concern and care for the common good is also evident in the continuing high rates of marriage breakdown, the annual number of abortions, and the declining number of births.

A plan of action is now before us. Our Canadian reality is truly based on a transcendent vision of life based on Christian revelation that has made us a free, democratic and caring society, recognized throughout the world as a champion of human rights and human dignity. We will only continue to offer this treasure to humanity and history if we preserve what is deep and good and valid in our own heritage. And one of the greatest gifts we have received is marriage.

You lay people are the ministers of the Sacrament of Marriage. You are its beneficiaries. Uphold the dignity of this important institution and sacrament. Support the Marriage Preparation Programs in your parish communities. Insist that in your parishes and dioceses, you have solid vocational programs for young adults and young people. It all begins there.

Use such opportunities and programs to give public witness, to speak about the sacredness and dignity of marriage, of family life, to future generations. Parishes, dioceses and countries that do not have creative pastoral strategies and vocational programs for young people leave the door open to tremendous moral confusion and misunderstanding, misinformation, emptiness.

As Christians, we must banish from our vocabulary, our hearts and our communities all existing tendencies of hating, reviling and destroying gay people- women and men with a homosexual orientation who, in most cases, have not chosen that orientation. For many homosexual persons, being gay is anything but being happy.

Gay people may be our sons and daughters, brothers or sisters, colleagues, neighbors, confreres, health care workers, clergy, and friends. They are also sons and daughters of God, created in God's image and likeness.

Over the past months I have heard from some gay women and men who have expressed their own frustration that the "same sex marriage legislation" was thrust upon them just as it was thrust upon heterosexual persons. Hateful language that labels all homosexual persons as "radical gay activists out to destroy society and family life" is not only erroneous, it is anti-Christian.

In some cases, the homosexual person grew up in very ordinary, loving family situations. Sexual orientation was not the result of external conditions. In other cases, the gay son or daughter, brother or sister, grew up in a divided family situation, accustomed to brokenness and rejection.

I have never met any gay people who hate the Sacrament or Institution of Marriage of a man and a woman, or despise the raising of children by a mother and father united in marriage. I have encountered gay men and women who bear the suffering of broken families and who grew up in hostile environments that did not nurture life.

Finally, let us not forget that other bonds of love and interdependency, of commitment and mutual responsibility exist in society. They may be good; they may even be recognized in law. They are not the same as marriage; they are something else. No extension of terminology for legal purposes will change the observable reality that only the committed union of a man and a woman carries, not only the bond of interdependency between the two adults, but the inherent capacity to bring forth children.

Men and women commit themselves to one another and to the children who are created through them and whom they nurture to adulthood. Let us pray that this nurturing be done in healthy, holy and happy ways.

Together as God's people, let us continue to help one another to bear the crosses that the Lord has given to us. Let us recommit ourselves to building up the human family, to strengthening and enshrining marriage, to blessing and nurturing children, and to making our homes, families and parish communities holy, welcoming places for women and men of every race, language, orientation and way of life.

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