

The Marriage Issue

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

"Canadians are heirs to an extraordinarily rich humanism, enriched even more by the blend of many different cultural elements. But the core of your heritage is the spiritual and transcendent vision of life based on Christian revelation which gave vital impetus to your development as a free, democratic and caring society, recognized throughout the world as a champion of human rights and human dignity."

He continued: "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."

What powerful words to describe our Canadian reality!

Since Canada's Supreme Court has refused to give an opinion on the constitutionality of marriage as the union of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others, the Canadian Government has announced its intention to present a bill at the beginning of the next session of Parliament that, if passed, would change the traditional definition of marriage to include same sex partnerships within the same legal framework as the conjugal relation between a man and a woman. Responsibility for legislation belongs to the federal Parliament, upon which now falls the task of deciding how to adapt the legal framework for civil marriage to the cultural and social evolution of Canadian society. This is a momentous and far-reaching decision.

In Cardinal Ambrozic's excellent letter last week to Prime Minister Paul Martin, he wrote: "So far the debate has been among lawyers. It is time for there to be a debate in Canadian society as a whole. It is time for ordinary Canadians to be given a sufficient opportunity to discuss the issues and to reflect on the deeper implications before a debate occurs in Parliament and a decision is made that could irrevocably change the nature of marriage and the family in Canada... . An open and full public debate would explore these and other implications of the proposed re-definition of marriage."

The Cardinal urged the Prime Minister, to table a Bill that legislatively enacts the traditional opposite-sex definition of marriage, coupled with a clause that provides for the legislation to take effect notwithstanding the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Cardinal Ambrozic said to Prime Minister Martin: "As you know, the so-called "notwithstanding clause" has a five-year life span. A five-year period will allow this national discussion sufficient time to occur and to ripen into a sober and careful decision..."

Cardinal Ambrozic also told the Prime Minister that Members of Parliament must be free to vote in accordance with their consciences on a matter. "I urge you to permit all parliamentarians, Cabinet Ministers included, to vote their consciences on any legislation that is put to a vote in Parliament on the issue of marriage."

At the end of last week, the Cardinal Archbishop of Quebec City, Marc Ouellet issued a clear, thoughtful statement on entitled "Marriage and Society: For a Free and Enlightened Vote in Parliament." Cardinal Ouellet, who also holds the title of Primate of the Church in Canada, appealed to MP's not to feel bound by party discipline when the Liberal Government's same-sex bill reaches the House of Commons.>

Cardinal Ouellet pointed out: "Contrary to an interpretation that has become widespread in the media, the Supreme Court's judgment does not have force of law and has involved no change in the current legal framework. It is Parliament that must decide about this matter of such great importance for the future of our society and of its fundamental values."

The Primate of the Canadian Church also stated:

"Following on the adoption of the various charters of rights and freedoms, we have witnessed the concerted and continuous development of a movement of opinion aimed at banishing all discrimination against homosexually oriented persons. This change of mentality favors the welcome and respect of their rights, and also their equal treatment in society. These persons have suffered certain injustices that have been largely corrected, and a new cultural climate now facilitates their life in society."

Cardinal Ouellet then went to the heart of the matter: "At the risk of being judged "politically incorrect," we need to recall that the bill under discussion is offensive to the moral and religious sensibility of a great number of citizens, both Catholic and non-Catholic. In fact, many Christians and adherents of other religious traditions find the union of persons of the same sex to be morally unacceptable, even as they refrain from judging those persons themselves."

I began this reflection recalling the profound words of Pope John Paul II at the beginning of World Youth Day 2002. I conclude these thoughts with a question and a plea to our viewers across Canada.

Our bishops, from sea to sea to sea, have asked us to take an active role in defending the traditional meaning of marriage as the union of one man and one woman. Let us speak out clearly to the members of Parliament that they leave marriage unchanged while meeting the legitimate needs of those in other interdependent relationships.

As Cardinal Ouellet pointed out last week in his statement, "The question Canadian society has to face is this: do we wish to discard the universal definition of marriage, which reflects the nature of things, the common sense of the people, the Judeo-Christian

tradition, and the wisdom of the great religions? The choice to be made could bring in its wake bitter and unpredictable demographic, social, cultural, and religious consequences."

For the good of future generations, you have a civic and religious rights, duties and obligations to let your voices be heard on this very important matter that touches each of us, and those who will come after us. First of all pray for guidance for our legislators as they decide how they should vote on the marriage question. You lay people are the ministers of the Sacrament of Marriage. You are its beneficiaries. Uphold the dignity of this important institution and sacrament. Make your views known to your Members of Parliament and to the Prime Minister directly.

Support the Marriage Preparation Programs in your parish communities. Insist that in your parishes and dioceses, you have solid programs for young adults and young people. It all begins there. You have something to say about the future in how you prepare for it today. Parishes, dioceses and countries that do not have creative pastoral strategies and programs for young people leave the door open to tremendous confusion and misunderstanding, misinformation, emptiness.

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. We must preserve it if we Canadians wish to make further significant contributions to humanity and history.>

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