

Gay marriage and the Catholic Church

I have been a Catholic priest for over fifty years, and I write in the hope that I am genuine in my respect for and delight in those whose sexual orientation is homosexual and who have found love and want to celebrate this love in a way that gives public expression to their mutual commitment. This is something that heterosexual couples have always been able to do, and, though their union does not always survive, their marriage brings them a level of social support, because society recognizes the public value of their commitment, for their children, obviously, but for all of us.

In wanting a public celebration of committed love for homosexual couples, I believe that I am drawing on the deepest wisdom of the Catholic heritage, while acknowledging that there have been contrary statements from some within the Church who claim authority. I wonder how much lack of information and perhaps fear play a role in this?

I may not be sufficiently informed myself, but, along with my respect and delight, I still think that there are deeper reasons for judging that it is unwise for the community, which should and wants to celebrate homosexual unions, to call such unions 'marriage'. At the level of committed love there is no basis for seeing one form of union as better than another. But there is a lot more to marriage than shared love. For reasons that I surely don't have to list here, heterosexual union and homosexual union are not identical.

I will be accused of 'discriminating'. To discriminate is to detect differences. The problem arises only when we discriminate in order to advantage some and disadvantage others. Then we speak of discriminating *against* certain groups or certain people. This misuse of discrimination endangers all our institutions. However, recognising and acknowledging difference is basic to medicine, as without it diagnosis would be little more than guesswork. It is basic to law, as without it verdicts would be arbitrary. It is basic to the whole scientific endeavour. The problem does not lie with discrimination (we should recognise differences), but with the purpose behind discriminating, and what it is used for.

Hopefully, as communities mature majorities come to realise the injustice of the ways we discriminate *against* minorities. There is a long history of heterosexuals discriminating *against* homosexuals. However much we back up our behaviour with arguments from reason or religion, this kind of discrimination appears to be born of ignorance and fuelled by prejudice and fear. When we reflect on the fact that committed relationships are at the heart of a healthy society, we realise how important it is to respect, encourage, support and celebrate the giving and receiving of love, between heterosexuals and homosexuals. We must learn to respect other people's experience, and we must dialogue with the hope of deepening our understanding of experiences that are foreign to us. The loving commitment of homosexuals to each other needs the kind of protection of law that heterosexuals have taken for granted.

Surely we can achieve this while recognising that the two forms of union, heterosexual and homosexual, are different, and significantly so. While not every heterosexual union leads to procreation, the union, of its nature, is geared to it. This is not true of homosexual love. Of course, a homosexual couple can love and care for children, whose nurturing is a fruit of their love. Children, however, do not come into existence as a result of their union. We discriminate because we recognise the differences between heterosexual and homosexual unions. We discriminate, not to advantage one union and disadvantage the other, but to acknowledge the difference.

All societies, including our own, acknowledge the importance of heterosexual union for the very continuance of the society. We call it 'marriage'. Surely we have now come to recognise the terrible way in which society had discriminated against people whose way of offering and receiving committed love is homosexual. Many have come to see our prejudice and acknowledge our fear of difference. However, since the two unions are not the same we should continue to 'discriminate' between them. As we ask those in a homosexual union how they would like that union to be named, confusion, not clarity or truth, is the result of calling different realities by the same name. It makes for bad law. Homosexuals who are wanting their union to be called 'marriage' are asking society to overlook the differences between heterosexual and homosexual unions. They may also be hardening prejudice rather than softening it.

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Australians should rejoice in committed gay relationships and afford them the same legal rights and public recognition as the union of a man and woman, says a Canberra Catholic priest.

But he stopped short of supporting gay marriage, saying it would be more appropriate to give formalised homosexual unions a different name.

In a notable departure from the public teachings of some church authorities, Dickson-based priest Michael Fallon called for a "public celebration of committed love for homosexual couples", saying he feared ordinary people were being driven away from the Catholic faith by views they saw as hardline and irrelevant.

Ordained in 1961, Father Fallon said his time as a chaplain at the University of NSW, where he met gay students, helped him look past prejudices against homosexual people and convinced him that their relationships should be welcomed by the community. "[The public should offer] not just recognition, but joy, public joy in their communion with each other, that's the least we can offer people," he said.

The sacred scriptures scholar, who is receiving aggressive treatment for leukaemia, said there were church authorities who saw homosexual behaviour and partnerships as immoral, but many priests he spoke to supported recognition of committed same-sex relationships.

He said biblical references to homosexuality should be seen within the context of the time, rather than taken literally. "When Paul spoke about homosexual behaviour, the key is what was he actually speaking about? Did he know about two adults lovingly committing themselves to each other? We haven't the faintest idea, and it's quite unlikely," he said.

Father Fallon said there was a growing movement within the church towards greater recognition of gay relationships. "I'm just confident from the people I talk to that love will prevail, rather than a fixed position based on an understanding of what's called natural law that I think needs revisiting," he said.

But the priest said he did not support calling gay unions "marriage", because he said heterosexual and homosexual unions were not identical.

"If it happened I wouldn't lose a lot of sleep over it, but I don't think it's a good idea to confuse the issue, so I'm hoping they can come up with another word," he said.

Read more: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/priest-backs-support-for-gay-relationships-20130502-2iw4u.html#ixzz2SDhbJJEd>