

Editorial

CHRISTIAN FAMILY AND UNCHRISTIAN MEMBERS

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1. Introduction

The Irish went to the polls in May for the referendum on whether to give same-sex marriages equal constitutional status with traditional marriages between a man and a woman. Voters were asked to vote Yes/No on whether to add the following clause to the Irish Constitution: 'Marriage may be contracted in accordance with law by two persons without distinction as to their sex.' The Irish public were asked either to ratify or to reject the Marriage Equality Bill 2015 which was passed by Ireland's parliament by an overwhelming majority in March.

The polling at the referendum on the proposal for the amendment of the Constitution contained in the Thirty-fourth Amendment of the Constitution (Marriage Equality) Bill 2015 took place on Friday 22 May 2015. According to the results of the referendum published in *Iris Oifigiúil* (the Official Gazette) on 26 May 2015, the turnout was 60.52%. The Final Position showed that a staggering 62.07% voted 'Yes' and 37.93% voted 'No'.

2. Another Way of Being Catholic?

Ireland is supposed to be Catholic. However, it has undergone immense change in recent decades. Even though nearly 85 percent of Irish people still self-identify as Roman Catholics, and the church urged the faithful to vote 'No', the polls showed that they lost the argument. This is a very significant step for any country; let alone Ireland, with its strong Catholic heritage. Since the Irish voters have backed the Bill, Ireland has become the first country in the world to pass marriage equality by a popular, national vote. It is historic indeed.

The 'Yes' vote is a testament to the shifting social and religious reality of Ireland in recent decades as the country has rapidly become

more liberal and secular, partly in reaction to a series of scandals involving the Catholic Church and how the Church dealt with them.

It's remarkable to think that homosexuality was illegal in Ireland until 1993. And divorce only became lawful in Ireland after two referendums in 1995. The plummeting church attendances reflect the shifting social landscape: in the 1970s about 90 percent of Irish people said they went to Mass once a week, today that figure has fallen to about 35 percent, according to a 2012 survey by the Association of Catholic Priests. Rates in urban areas and among young people are lower still, and many predict that the gay marriage vote is likely to widen the growing gap between the Church and the people.

Friday's referendum, in which 60% of the 3.2 million eligible voters cast their ballots in the poll, saw 62 percent vote in favour of legalising same-sex marriage with 38 percent opposed. The margin between the 'yes' and the 'no' is large enough to question the relevance of the views of the Church especially among young people voter turnout higher than usual. The result presents a huge challenge for the whole Church.

3. The Ecclesial Response

The result of the Irish referendum to legalise same-sex marriage highlights a gap between the present views of the Church and modern society in some areas. In response to the referendum in which the country voted overwhelmingly in favour of legalising same-sex marriage, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin said that Church needs a reality check right across the board, to look at the things we are doing well and look at the areas where we have drifted away completely from young people.

The blatant gap staring in our face, we cannot move into denial of the realities. We cannot bring about a sense of renewal, with a sense of denial. Hence, Archbishop Martin was candid about how he felt after the results were out: "I appreciate how gay and lesbian men and women feel on this day. That they feel this is something that is enriching the way they live. I think it is a social revolution." Although he admitted that he voted 'No' in the referendum, he insisted that gay rights should be *respected* "without changing the definition of marriage." Speaking about the future course of action from the part of the Church, he noted that "if this referendum is an affirmation of the views of young people then the Church has a huge task in front of it to find the language to get its message across" to them. With a prick of conscience, he observed that most of the young people who voted 'yes'

in the referendum are products of our Catholic school system for 12 years. This fact makes the challenge to get across the message of the Church ever more intimidating.

4. The Ensuing Polarisation

A climate of polarisation has been ushered in by the Irish referendum in both the Church and society in the West. Any attempt to take recourse to the time-honoured ready-made answers to some of these pressing questions of our time risks being denounced by one side or another making the gap ever wider. In the face of the Irish experience, some might argue that either the doctrinal tradition of the Roman Catholic Church is preserved unmitigated without change or re-interpretation, or the Church can set itself on a course to a total accommodation to postmodern culture. Such presumed alternatives are neither Christian nor supportive. Instead, what is required is an in-depth dialogue on the approach that the essence of Christian biblical tradition provides for meeting the diverse challenges of today, especially that of the differently experienced human sexual orientation. We argue that, as it has happened on many occasions in the history of the Church, the Church can bounce back with resilience, rising to the occasion reinterpreting its own tradition in the light of both of the merciful love of God and the experience of some of its members who choose to speak out.

The task is to transcend the suspicions and to overcome the fears and taboos that have been poisoning the climate in the Church for a long time, especially in recent times, and to help establish a platform for informed exchange and respectful debate.

5. Marriage and Family

The second point that we would like to dwell upon is the Sacrament of Marriage and Christian married life. Marriage is certainly a sacrament and its indissoluble character is unquestioned on account of the divine will that the man and woman joined in marriage be one and the command of Jesus that the couple thus come together might never be parted from one another until death. It takes a great deal of courage and trust in the providence of God for two people to come together promising each other and the community that they would stick to each other no matter what comes their way. We admire the resolve of those thousands of Christian couples who continue give witness to the covenantal fidelity of God through an exemplary marital life that they live in the midst of great difficulties. Hats off to those couples who

despite various incompatibilities hang in there with great courage to each other either on account of the vows that they had exchanged or on account of the children and their future. Their life, I dare say, is no less important to the history of Christianity than the thousands of men and women who gave up their life for their faith embracing martyrdom.

Unfortunately, there are times when, in spite of their tremendous efforts to hold it together, they choose to live separate lives. Marriage breakdown is a disaster for the whole community and not just the sad ordeal of the separating couple. It involves the couple themselves, the children, the families on either side, relatives and friends. It certainly involves the Church too. Often the Church gets involved neither with a follow up programme after the marriage, nor when the trouble is brewing in the family. Often the Church gets involved only as undertakers to pick up the pieces after the deal is done and it is too late.

The Catholic Church has often lacked an effective life enrichment programme to support families. Often we attend to the persons who are emerging from such the fiasco caused by separation or divorce first when they are about to enter into a new and hopefully healthier relationship before God and in the Church by excluding them as sinners from the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. More often than not, it is the fear of the scandal that drives our reason than the mercy of God. In this Family Year, we ought to deal with the breakdown of a married relationship when it occurs. We need to be resourceful in supporting married couples before their marriage breaks down and, when this is unavoidable, to accompany them on a process of healing.

6. Mercy in Interpretation

The Bible and the texts of the tradition are the sources of Christian theology. They are read in the different cultural and linguistic contexts of our world. The self-communication of God has reached our century in and through language and so there cannot be a language-free approach to God's self-communication in history. The report of the Divine revelation enshrined in the biblical texts carry as much limitation as the human beings who reported it and their language. The inspiration of God was interpreted, understood and expounded in human language in which the further proclamation the good news of God's creative and redemptive project took place. This further has gathered accretions of centuries and calcifications of culture. Hence,

the necessity of a merciful reflection on our common hermeneutical predicament.

Certainly, there are absolutes in the bible, those enduring elements, which never change. However, our understanding of these elements changes. Unless we are ready to change our understanding of various texts under the ongoing inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:26) incessantly, unless we curb our ever present propensity to maintain the status quo by means of methods like, inquisition, anti-modernist oaths and so on, not only do we fall foul of ideology, but also we fall prey to idolatry.

7. Role of Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the art of understanding, a meaning-making linguistic mechanism, which can help us refrain from inclining towards theological, ideological and moral reductionism. Biblical hermeneutics in the Christian circles comprises of a genuine love of God and of God's incarnate Word in history and a continuing search for the meaning and significance of our faith in our respective historical, cultural and communicative circumstances. Since we cannot appropriate the meaning of the text and freeze it in a moment in time, interpretation never stops.

The Irish referendum has highlighted the experience of a marginalized minority in the Church whose voice is heard now. In the light of this voice, Christians of all persuasions need each other when reflecting on the tradition and practice of our faith. What is required from the Fathers of the forthcoming synod is a critical and creative exploration of faith in the light of the present challenges. In their mid-term report the synod fathers spoke of mercy, of the law of graduality, caused by God leading his people step by step, and the call to recognise the suffering of those affected by family and marital breakdown. The report also speaks of "courageous" and "new pastoral choices."

8. Together Towards the Kingdom

However, when there is an attempt to hide behind claims to doctrinal immutability, we fall prey to fundamentalism and traditionalism. Instead, as *Dei Verbum* suggests, the Church must enjoy the possibility of growth in faith and understanding with the help of the Holy Spirit. It is in this respect that the document points to the role of the contemplation and study of those believers who ponder these things in their hearts, their sense of the spiritual realities that they

experience, and the proclamation of the Magisterium. Christian believers, the laity and the clergy together are involved in this process of meaning-making together.

Once faith in the good news of God's emerging reign and an awareness of our hermeneutical predicament are accepted as our point of departure, specific moral issues and challenges to Christian family life can be considered with a better sense of direction. God's reign is a reign of love which is the hallmark of his Kingdom. This has nothing to do with sentimentalism or romanticism, but with our efforts to recognize and relate to the otherness of our fellow human beings and of ourselves, and to the radical otherness of God. Otherness can never be exhausted in our acts of love. Instead, in loving the other (despite his or her orientation), God and my own self, I am drawn ever more deeply into the recognition of the otherness of each one in the Kingdom as he or she recognizes mine.

Since families are constituted of various 'otherness', dealing with otherness is the business of love exercised first in the family and then, subsequently in the society. Sociology, anthropology, psychology, biology and several other disciplines can further deepen our understanding of human love and of sexual expressions in love especially within the confines of the family.

All of us are created by God. It is the experience of some of the human beings who are created by God that they have a different sexual orientation, because he has created them as such. Since he has created them with different sexual orientations, and since they are part of the Church and it is their wish and right to continue to remain part of the Church, it is imperative to identify an adequate order for these different forms of love and sexual expression. Sexuality is a gift of God to the creation be accepted in faithful love.

9. Beyond the Biblical Stories

Sacramental marriage has developed as the order for the love of heterosexual couples in the Church. However, it should not be forgotten that this sacramental process presupposes the support and encouragement of married couples by their local communities. Biblical studies would confirm the fact that many of the Judeo Christian practices have their roots in the pre-biblical times. It is these practices that have been sanctioned by the communities behind the respective biblical texts that are enshrined there. In this scheme, it has been recently found that a local community gives support and

encouragement to a group of people with a different sexual orientation to live a meaningful life.

The major challenge that the Church is facing today is its attitude to its members with different sexual orientations and some of their same-sex relationships. The Church has failed to recognize and accompany that minor section of the faithful. It has failed to identify a proper framework for their meaningful life before God and this failure has diminished its credibility as an institution charged with proclaiming God's love with mercy and with promoting human love. References to selected biblical phrases made out of context for the purpose of segregating a section of the children of God can never deflect the invitation from God to all human beings to live in loving relationships. The task of the Church today is to look at some of the challenges of discipleship in an honest and constructive way in the light of the Gospel and to find the framework of a meaningful life for *all* the children of God who are entitled to the abundant life (Jn 10:10).

10. A Biblical Experience of Change

There are no absolutes except God. The attribution of absolute immutability to anything other than God is idolatry. Right from the time of Abraham, circumcision was an absolute necessity as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant that a male member of the people of God would bear in his body. It was so sacrosanct that, according to the biblical scholars, in its absence, God would make an attempt on the life of Moses! (Ex 4:24-26). Certainly, Jesus, as he belonged to a Jewish family and society, bore it. All his disciples and invariably, all the members of the first Church bore it. It was an absolute.

Imagine the horror of the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem and of their leaders when Paul, prompted by the Gentile experience of Jesus, on their behalf moves a proposal for an exemption from the "absolute". Galvanized by his experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the entire household of the Gentile Cornelius before his very eyes, Peter lends a helping hand for a "yes" vote. Was not the Holy Spirit present when James, the brother of the Lord, as the head of the Jerusalem Church, himself a Jew, declared the result? A peaceful revolution that brought about a change in the entire Church, as all those who were concerned were ready to follow the promptings of the Spirit.

Speak about the cultural and contextual ramifications of the understanding of the "absolutes", which James called "essentials" according to the Law of Moses: "For it has seemed good to the Holy

Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these *essentials*: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well." (Acts 15:29). As the subsequent history shows us, there would be an immediate shift in the understanding of one of these "essentials" and others, except the last, would follow suit. Paul, in another context, with his apostolic authority and Pharisaic judgement, would rule that abstaining from food that has been sacrificed to idols does not make any sense because there is no other God but the Father. And abstinence from such food is a recognition given to another god! Paul does not care if you eat it or not! The only care he has is for those novice Christians whose conscience is still weak as they are not rooted in faith. The implication is the need of making their weak conscience strong enabling them live a fuller life in Christ.

When it comes to the 'strangled', which again has its roots in Leviticus, several cultures have not given any attention to it. Even in the ecclesial traditions that are as ancient as the Jerusalem church itself, this directive had no currency. For centuries Christians enjoyed strangled birds as part of their diet. Pope Francis would have gladly relished without a qualm the pansen, and black pudding served in the Vatican cafeteria when he surprised the proprietors going down there to have a lunch with the Vatican *proletariats*! These culinary items are sausages prepared primarily from the blood of animals!

11. Conclusion

In the complex world of ours, where people have begun to speak of their differences, however different they are, the Church is invited constantly to seek meet these differences in mercy and love. In the face of these varying experiences, asking the right questions would be the secret to unlocking great possibilities for profound and relevant answers that would talk directly to the experiences of the people of our time. The well-worn, time-honoured conventional answers to the new and the ever evolving questions tend to be archaic and outdated. With the Irish experience and the experience of thousands of our people in married life, we have embarked on a path of public, critical reflection and prayer.

The Synod on Family that began in Rome last year and continues its second phase in October this year, with a focus on *the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and contemporary world* should be another occasion to let in a *waft of fresh air* to change this climate. In the

year of the family, the faithful as a whole are invited to make a concerted effort to recognise the need to explore the horizon of the particular theological, moral, social and ecclesial issue that has touched a section of the Church so deeply that it cannot keep silent any longer. The Synod is surely a promising start and an encouragement for the entire Church to look forward to a time of harmony and growth with great expectation.

Pope Francis in a letter issued to families said that the extraordinary synod would be followed a year later by the Ordinary Assembly, which will also have the family as its theme. The World Meeting of Families is due to take place in Philadelphia in September 2015. The Pope hopes that through these events "the Church will undertake a true journey of discernment and adopt the necessary pastoral means to help families face their present challenges with the light and strength that comes from the Gospel." It is in the light of this declaration that the current issue of Herald of the East is reflecting on the contribution that St Kuriakose Elias Chavara had made to the society by means of the renewal he brought about in the families.

This issue of the Herald of the East makes a brief study of the recent teachings of the Church on families and considers the fact that genuine vocations to consecrated and priestly life can come only from Christian families rooted in faith. However, since modern families are not without challenges posed by the modern world, we make a survey of these challenges and propose a few ways to face these challenges. It is in this context that we consider the role of women in the families with the help of the contribution that Chavara's mother made towards his journey to holiness. We conclude our reflections with the note that Chavara, *the champion of families* in his time, had delineated a few precepts to bring about an ongoing renewal of the families of all times and the upbringing of the children as integrated members of the society.