



'It is every Catholics duty to resist gay marriage': Senior bishops step up battle against 'profoundly radical step' with letter to worshippers

The Catholic Church today told worshippers they have a 'duty' to resist Government plans on gay marriage.

A letter from two senior archbishops, read in 2,500 parish churches during Mass, argued changes would reduce the significance of marriage.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols, the leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, and Archbishop Peter Smith, the Archbishop of Southwark, called on people to 'do all we can to ensure that the true meaning of marriage is not lost for future generations'.

'Profoundly radical step': Archbishops Peter Smith, left, and Vincent Nichols has stepped up the Catholic Church's resistance to plans to legalise gay marriage

At present, gays and lesbians are allowed to enter civil partnerships, which offer most of the legal protections of marriage. But the term 'marriage' is not used.

Under the plans, same-sex couples will be able to have full marriages in registry offices, as heterosexual couples can.

Changing the legal definition of marriage would be a 'profoundly radical step', the Archbishops warn, and would strip the union of its 'distinctive nature'.

The letter says the reform would undermine the role of a mother and father to produce and raise children, and focus only on the commitment between two people.

The Archbishops' letter argues: 'Changing the legal definition of marriage would be a profoundly radical step. Its consequences should be taken seriously now.

'The law helps to shape and form social and cultural values. A change in the law would gradually and inevitably transform society's understanding of the purpose of marriage.

'It would reduce it just to the commitment of the two people involved. There would be no recognition of the complementarity of male and female or that marriage is intended for the procreation and education of children.

'We have a duty to married people today, and to those who come after us, to do all we can to ensure that the true meaning of marriage is not lost for future generations.'

The letter argues that the roots of marriage lie in human nature and the pattern of 'complementarity and fertility' in the union are affirmed by many other religious traditions.

It says: 'Neither the Church nor the State has the power to change this fundamental understanding of marriage itself.'

And it insists that same-sex couples are not unfairly discriminated against under the current law.

'The reasons given by our government for wanting to change the definition of marriage are those of equality and discrimination,' the Archbishops write.

'But our present law does not discriminate unjustly when it requires both a man and a woman for marriage. It simply recognises and protects the distinctive nature

of marriage.'

Prime Minister David Cameron's official spokesman has said in response: 'The Government has made clear its commitment to equality. We believe people should have the option of civil marriage, irrespective of sexual orientation.'

Ben Summerskill, chief executive of gay rights organisation Stonewall, said: 'At a time when 50,000 families in Britain are homeless and a billion people across the world live on less than a dollar a day, it's extraordinary that Archbishops are worrying about the family arrangements of a few thousands gay people.'

'We assume that Roman Catholic congregations will take as much notice of the instruction to marginalise gay people's relationships as they do of the regular instruction they receive not to use birth control.'

Human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell echoed Mr Summerskill's comments, branding it 'bizarre' that the Archbishops had chosen to mobilise their congregations against gay marriage 'given the many grave problems in the world' like war, hunger and poverty.

'It shows a perverse sense of moral priorities,' he said. 'The Archbishops are preaching a gospel of division and discrimination. They want the law to discriminate against gay couples. Discrimination is not a Christian value.'

'If churches value love and commitment, why are they opposing gay couples showing their love and commitment by getting married?'

Mr Tatchell, who is head of the Equal Love campaign against the bans on gay marriages and heterosexual civil partnerships, argued that opening up marriage to same-sex couples did not detract 'one iota' from heterosexual marriage.

'If the Archbishops support the institution of marriage, surely they should welcome the fact that many lesbian and gay couples want to get married?' he said.

'Catholics are entitled to believe that same-sex marriages are wrong, but they are not entitled to demand that their rejection of gay marriages should be imposed on the rest of society and enforced by law.'

The letter was worded in less incendiary terms than those used by the head of the Catholic Church in Scotland, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, who earlier this week described marriage between same-sex couples as an 'aberration' that would lead society even further into 'immorality'.



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