

AEC STATEMENT

MARRIAGE: A COVENANT BETWEEN A MAN AND A WOMAN

Introduction

We, the Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference joyfully greet the faithful of all the various Arch/Dioceses of the Antilles Episcopal Conference with the words of the risen Christ addressed to his apostles: "Peace be with you!" [John 20:21].

Following on from the 2014's Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, in 2015, the Holy Father, Pope Francis will convene a Synod of Bishops in Rome to study and reflect upon the reality and importance of the family. To that end, we, your bishops wish to make clear the Church's teaching on the nature of marriage and the family in God's plan. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: "Marriage and the family are ordered to the good of the spouses and to the procreation and education of children...A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family" [CCC # 2201 & # 2202].

The holy institution of marriage thus understood is the very cell of society and Church life. We, therefore, commend and salute those who espouse this noble vocation which is beautiful and at the same time inspirational when lived faithfully, in spite of difficulties and hardship encountered because of its self-sacrificing nature. For that reason, Vatican Council II reminds us thus: "Christ our Lord has abundantly blessed this love, which is rich in its divine love and modelled on Christ's own union with the Church" [Church in the Modern World, #48]. We pray that married couples will never tire witnessing to their being "a union of loves in the service of life." Indeed, this is a lifestyle worthy of praise and our whole-hearted support!

We wish to reach out to our brothers and sisters who espouse a lifestyle that is contrary to the divine teaching proclaimed by the Church from time immemorial. As your bishops we wish to affirm that you are loved and blessed by God with many gifts and talents which have enriched both Church and society.

We also admit that we cannot begin to appreciate fully the extent of the pain, anguish and trials that you daily undergo, especially within the atmosphere that is prevalent in the Caribbean. Like Pope Francis, we, too, sincerely hope that you—like us—will seek to know and love personally the will of God who embraces all his children, without exception, with a love that surpasses all understanding.

The Love of God.

This is the basis of God's laws and commandments which have as their objective the total fulfilment or happiness of persons. The Church recognises the fact that God always reveals his designs for his creatures which are made in the very image of God [Gen.1: 27]. When we begin to fathom the beauty of this teaching and how it impacts upon people's situation, it leads us to consider two aspects of God's revelation: Creation which determines the law of nature; Redemption or re-creation which pertains to the divine positive law consonant with the salvation and glorification of humanity.

Creation [Law of Nature].

It is evident from the species created that there is some set order that regulates and furthers the on-going creation set in motion by God, the Creator. Both inanimate and animate beings are regulated by a certain design that is enshrined in the very act of creation [cf. Gen. 1: 11-12; 24-25]. Of interest is the fact that all are created according to their kind. Most importantly, "God created man in his image; in the image of God he created him: male and female he created them"(Gen. 1:27). They are created to complement one another and are explicitly directed to multiply and care for the earth [cf. Gen. 1:28]. For believers--be they Jewish, Christian or Muslim--this creation story undergirds the essence of marriage and the family.

Redemption [Divine Positive Law].

The Ten Commandments are the basics of the divine law, the objective of which is proper relationships with God and with fellow human beings. The Saviour sums up the Decalogue under the Great Commandment: love God and love neighbour [cf. Dt. 6: 4-5; Lev. 19: 17], all of which culminates in the redemptive death and resurrection of Jesus, which ushers in a new life welling up into eternal life. This Great Love Story of salvation could be considered as God embracing all of humanity with an everlasting love. Dare we say that married love between man and woman reflects this beautiful union?

By his saving death and glorious resurrection, Jesus has liberated humankind from the innumerable burden of laws and regulations which were meant to safeguard God's covenanted relationship with mankind. However, in no way was license intended, as St. Paul reminds the early Church: "After all, brothers, you were called to be free; do not use your freedom as an opening for self-indulgence, but be servants to one another in love, [Gal. 5:13]. Clearly St. Paul gives us an indication of our relationships with one another, a relationship that is based on love that is Christ-related.

The Gender Debate.

Having established ever so briefly the context, within which Christians should conduct themselves, be they married or single, we wish to comment on the topical issue of gender. It must be clearly established that all human beings, be they male or female, young or old, are endowed with inalienable rights, but rights, however, that must not infringe upon the rights of other human beings nor undermine the common good of society. What are some of those rights? The right to freedom of expression, right to freedom of religion, right to marry and to have a family, the right to an education, health care, housing, and employment. Without such rights life would not be worth living!

To sum up, then, the right to life is the most fundamental of all rights; all others are predicated on that right to life that ensures the integrity of one's dignity which is imparted neither by Church nor State, but by God, the Creator. Each person, male or female, is equal in the pursuit of those rights that ensure fulfilment of one's potential, but it must be remembered that with rights come responsibilities. For Christians, such responsibilities entail their relationship with God, and are expressed by acts of reverence, respect, and acceptance of God's will which is enshrined both in natural and divine positive laws. No one has a right to contravene natural and divine laws. Doing so leads to our peril and the determination of family life and society.

Marriage as Covenant between Man and Woman.

Within the wider context of gender, we return to the question of Marriage. We do so because world-wide there is much discussion with a view to altering the age-old tradition of this far-reaching relationship that affects the very existence of the human race, civil society, and the Church. Marriage between one man and one woman is not only a Christian institution. It is also pre-Christian and is recognised as the ideal means and context whereby children are raised with love that is both masculine and feminine [to correspond to the masculinity and femininity of each person], and educated for their

rightful role in the society. Christ himself recognised and raised this complementary union of man and woman to the level of a sacrament--not just as a contract but a covenant. We never tire to reflect on this marital union as one that signifies the great mystery of covenanted union of Christ and his Church [cf. Eph. 5: 21-33].

Same-Sex Union

One of the "rights" being promulgated aggressively today in our Caribbean Region is the union between persons of the same gender. Notwithstanding our age-old tradition of marriage that ensures the propagation of the human race and the promulgation of our civilisation and culture, same-sex union is being promoted by very powerful forces, as a "civil right" and an alternative form of "marriage." In reality "Legal recognition of homosexual unions or placing them on the same level as marriage would mean not only the approval of deviant behaviour, with the consequence of making it a model in present-day society but would obscure basic values which belong to the common inheritance of humanity. The Church cannot fail to defend these values, for the good of men and women and for the good of society itself."¹

Given the fact that assets are jointly owned by persons espousing such a union, the Church recognizes the justice issue thus entailed. Nonetheless, in this regard the Church's teaching remains clear: "Nor is the argument valid according to which legal recognition of homosexual unions is necessary to avoid situations in which cohabiting homosexual persons, simply because they live together, might be deprived of real recognition of their rights as persons and citizens. In reality, they can always make use of the provisions of law -like all citizens from the standpoint of their private autonomy- to protect their rights in matters of common interest. It would be gravely unjust to sacrifice the common good and just laws on the family in order to protect personal goods that can and must be guaranteed in ways that do not harm the body of society."²

The Mission of the Church.

Does that mean that the Church is not concerned about men and women having such an orientation? Of course not! The Church's role is to proclaim the Truth, "in season, out of season" [2 Tim. 4:2] to each and every person who would listen to the Word of God being proclaimed. It is that proclamation received in faith that will bring about a deeper understanding of the Truth that the Holy Spirit wishes to impart to every human being in

¹ *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*, Guidelines from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003, Section 11.

² *Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions Between Homosexual Persons*, Guidelines from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2003, Section 9.

the quest of happiness and peace. Hopefully that deeper understanding will lead to a true encounter with Christ for all of us so that we see in each other brothers and sisters on the way to Christ. However, when people make choices for lifestyles contrary to the gospel, the Church must be full of mercy, slow to judge; rather she proclaims "in season, out of season," the love and compassion of the Good Shepherd who tenderly seeks out the stray sheep and says to one and all: "Come to me all who are weary and burdened" [Matt. 11:28].

Therefore, in imitation of the Good Shepherd, the Church must care for all human beings and love them. All are God's creatures "made in the image of God." To that end, the Church teaches regarding homosexual, bisexual and transsexual orientations: "They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfil God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition" [CCC, #2358].

The mission of the Church is clearly defined: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" [Matt. 28:19-20a]. That's the Church's mandate to proclaim the Good News of salvation!

Therefore, we appeal to our Catholic faithful to stand firm in the faith handed on to us by the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church impelled by and committed to the teaching and mission of Jesus. We also strongly urge that all will respect those brothers and sisters of ours who admit to having an orientation different from the majority of our people. We must respect them, do no violence to them, and respect their basic human rights, for they, along with us, are made in the image and likeness of God.

Respect for others, however, does not imply approval of the life styles contrary to the traditional ones, even if and when the State were to decriminalise the anti-buggery law, always bearing in mind that legality does not make a thing moral. Our duty, under all circumstances, is to express love and concern as we remain firm in the faith of our Fathers fostered and maintained by God's Holy Spirit.

“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with every good

that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” [Heb. 13: 20 – 21].

Yours faithfully in Christ,

Bishops of the Antilles Episcopal Conference

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