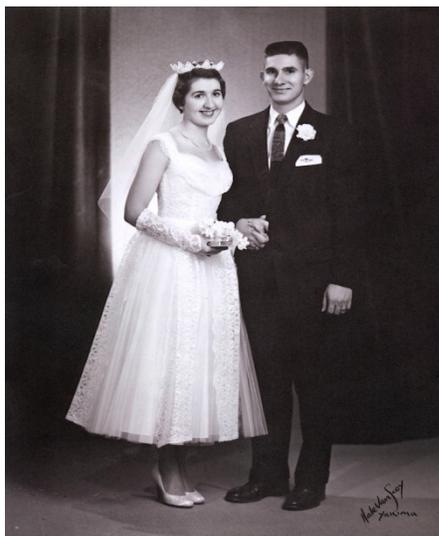


A Pastoral Letter on Marriage and Referendum 74

October 7, 2012

Most Rev. Joseph J. Tyson, Bishop of Yakima



Dear Friends:

Over fifty years ago, my mom and dad were married at St. Paul Cathedral in Yakima. Their marriage at St. Paul Cathedral made it possible for me to serve you as bishop from this same Cathedral. The promises they made on their wedding day align straight back to the preaching of Jesus noted in today's Gospel:

"...from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh..."

Yet it's interesting to note that in this particular passage, Jesus does not anchor his teaching back to the Jewish law of his day. Indeed, in today's Gospel, Jesus is challenging the Mosaic Law and its allowance of a system that allowed men to divorce their wives. In the context of first-century Middle East culture, such a decree would leave the woman impoverished. In challenging this injustice, Jesus reaches all the way back, rooting his preaching to the earliest moment of time to, "...the beginning of creation."

That phrase, "...from the beginning of creation..." is, I believe, the interpretive key for grasping how Jesus preaches on the question of marriage, for Jesus builds the teaching of our faith on human reason available to people of every faith, and of no faith at all.

I purposely point this out because as many of you know on November 6th this year we will be asked to "approve" or "reject" Washington State's new law – title R-74 – that redefines marriage to include two persons of the same sex. As Catholics, we have the privilege and obligation to form our consciences in order to exercise faithful citizenship and to witness to the Gospel through our words and actions. In this light, I would like to invite you to

reflect with me on some considerations as we approach the upcoming marriage referendum.

I begin with a simple question: What's at stake here? Supporters of R-74 would have you believe that this is a "civil rights" issue in the same way Cesar Chavez struggled for farm worker rights. The truth is that R-74 does not grant any new legal benefits beyond the Washington State legislature's 2009 law on domestic partnerships (which eroded the institution of marriage). Yet we continue to hear the language of "rights," and, even further, about "freedom" and "equality." Such language rightly touches the hearts of all people. However, the problem is that the language is seriously mistaken and misused here.

So what is R-74 about? First and foremost, R-74 redefines the meaning and institution of marriage. This means that R-74 is not about extending or expanding anyone's rights, freedom, or equality. On the contrary, R-74 redefines marriage, an institution defined "from the beginning of creation," which precedes both government and religion.

The fundamental question at stake in R-74 is therefore the question of marriage. Once that question is answered correctly, then questions about rights, freedom and equality can be justly addressed. Following Jesus' words and turning back to "the beginning of creation," we see that God willed marriage to be, at the same moment he created the human person as male and female. Marriage is the permanent, faithful and fruitful union of one man and one woman. In other words, from time immemorial, marriage has been recognized, privileged, and protected in societies because it is the only institution that unites a man and a woman together with any child born from their union. There is something uniquely special about a man and a woman coming together in wedlock, and this union has an essential public significance. The most obvious is the fact that every child has a mother and a father, and marriage is the only institution that meets a child's right, as far as possible, to know, love and be raised by his or her mother and father together, in an intact home.

R-74's conception of marriage is wrong from the start, since it presumes that marriage is simply a matter of what any two consenting adults desire. But this has never been the meaning of marriage, nor has it been the reason why marriage is recognized as essential to the common good. R-74 redefines marriage and therefore pays no heed to fundamental facts of human life and flourishing. It ignores the significance of the human body as well as sexual difference and complementarity, understood in their fullness – spiritual, biological, psychological, and emotional. R-74 overlooks the basic rights and equality of children, and it

dispenses with an appreciation for the unique place of motherhood and fatherhood. As a law, R-74 therefore conditions our society to forget or ignore basic realities of human existence, and, rather than foster human rights, it is actually offensive to basic human rights and equality. This is the tragic irony: a law touted as a victory for civil rights and equality is actually a loss of civil rights and equality for the most vulnerable among us, children.

We must also understand another tragic consequence. R-74 jeopardizes freedom rather than expands it. It endangers our religious liberty and the right of conscience. Once marriage is redefined as a genderless contract, it will become legally discriminatory for public and private institutions such as schools to promote the unique meaning of marriage, and to teach about the right of a child to be known, loved and raised by his or her own mother and father in a stable home. This law will challenge our right to educate about the unique value of children being raised by their own mothers and fathers. No institution or individual could propose that married mothers and fathers provide a singular benefit to children without being accused of discrimination.

This is not an idle concern. Recent attacks on churches, businesses and nonprofit organizations that express their conscientious objection to the redefinition of marriage underscore this danger. Those who uphold families based on the permanent, faithful relationship between a married man and woman as the best environment for raising children already have been accused of hate speech, and the right of religious institutions to freely practice their faith has been abridged. The acceptance of R-74 means that so-called same-sex “marriage” will replace real marriage – the union of a man and a woman – as the legal frame of reference for all public discourse. The terms “husband and wife” and “father and mother” will continue to recede as so-called gender-neutral terms overwhelm our public lexicon.

Let us not allow ourselves or others to be fooled by false reasoning. Protecting the definition of marriage as the union of one man and one woman does not make marriage “discriminatory.” It recognizes marriage between one man and one woman to be unique – unique among all other kinds of human relationships. Although our surrounding popular culture may define human identity by the terms “gay” and “straight,” our Church has a deeper and more accurate understanding of human identity based on male and female – sexual difference. It is within this identity that each one of us is called as a son or daughter of God. It is also within this identity of the human person as male and female that the meaning of marriage is discovered. Marriage is founded on sexual difference and ordered toward the good of husband and wife and the procreation and rearing of children. Again, this basic understanding of marriage and family is “built in” to the very nature of man and woman “...from the beginning of creation...” as Jesus notes in our Gospel today.

The Church’s proposal is always tied to her concern for the true good of every human person: what’s best for all of us. Social science research clearly indicates that it’s best when children can be raised by their fathers and mothers. It’s also best when we all work together to help parents overcome whatever shortcomings they may have. Further, it’s best when the starting point for understanding marriage’s meaning and public purpose is not the desires of adults but the meaning of the human person and the rights of children to be known and loved by their mothers and fathers. The true good is always what’s best.

So why do we settle for this kind of law? I think out of fear. There’s the plain misunderstanding of the meaning of marriage, which I think has been a significant factor in our cultural debate. But some of us have friends and family with same-sex attractions. And we are aware of a painful pattern of unjust discrimination and personal reject. We love them. We do not want to lose them. We do not want them to feel rejected again.

Yet, because we support marriage’s unique meaning does not mean we love any of our family any less. The truth of the matter is that our family and friends are in a variety of places when it comes to growth in the moral life – not only with same sex attractions – but all kinds of relational issues involving the human heart.

Indeed, come November 6th if all we hope for is the defeat of R-74, then our hopes are too little. When it comes to following the words of Jesus in our Sunday Gospel, we need to think BIG. We need to find ways to replant our Church’s moral proposal for human happiness that flows from marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

This “re-evangelization” is precisely what our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI called for in his launch of the “Year of Faith” this week. This “new evangelization” is not a new teaching. Rather it is our Church’s desire to re-introduce the Good News of Jesus Christ to those whose faith has grown weak or who lack conviction about the Church’s proposal of what bring human happiness in this life and the next.

I opened this letter with a wedding picture of my parents. I close by asking you to consider what kind of picture of marriage you desire to give the next generation. If you and I don’t uphold marriage as the union of a man and a woman, who will? If we are intimidated by those supporting marriage redefinition who picket and threaten donation boycotts of our charity and our ministry, then who will proclaim the true meaning of marriage?

This IS the Church’s mission given to us by Christ. As bishop, I intend to clearly, fearlessly and boldly proclaim this message – not only for your consideration – but the consideration of everyone. I know I can depend on you to do the same through your prayers, your other spiritual and material support, and your witness to the teachings of the Church in your daily lives.

+Bishop Joseph Tyson