

Archbishop Fisher: Does Pope Francis support same-sex marriage?

A number of commentators have recently suggested that loyalty to Catholic teaching, and especially to Pope Francis, would allow, even require, support for same-sex marriage; by implication, the Australian bishops misunderstand Catholic teaching and have been disloyal to Pope Francis by saying Catholics should vote NO. But what has Pope Francis actually said about this?

In April 2010, while still Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he issued a strongly worded pastoral letter on behalf of his fellow bishops against the redefinition of marriage in Argentine law. He reminded public authorities of their responsibility to protect marriage and its unique contribution to the common good. He pointed out that the state is not discriminating unjustly when it requires a man and a woman to make a marriage: "it merely recognises a natural reality". The future pope continued: "A marriage - made up of man and woman - is not the same as the union of two people of the same sex. To distinguish is not to discriminate but to respect differences... At a time when we place emphasis on the richness of pluralism and social and cultural diversity, it is a contradiction to minimise fundamental human differences. A father is not the same as a mother. We cannot teach future generations that preparing yourself for planning a family based on the stable relationship between a man and a woman is the same as living with a person of the same sex."

But has Cardinal Bergoglio changed his tune since becoming Pope Francis? He has famously emphasized the need for the Church to be close to people, accompanying them pastorally amidst the complexity of their lives, and helping to heal their wounds. He is acutely aware that many people with same-sex attraction feel alienated from the Church and society. He says that he will not judge homosexuals who are genuinely searching for God and seeking to do the good.

However, sensitive pastoral care towards gay and lesbian people, including same-sex couples, is consistent with upholding the truth of marriage as the lifelong union of man and woman open to procreation. Indeed, Pope Francis has been critical of the "narcissistic individualism" of contemporary culture, which promotes "a freedom disengaged from responsibility" and the common good - whether among heterosexual or homosexual persons. He has criticised "ideologies that attack the family project directly". These cultural forces, he thinks, undermine the natural and divinely-given plan for marriage and the family.[1] And he argues that upon the health of marriages and marriage-based families depend not only happiness and holiness for many individuals, but also the transmission of faith and ethics, the vigour of economies and polities, the care of life and the generations, and thus the very direction of peoples through history.[2]

In this context Pope Francis has repeatedly argued that the legalisation of same-sex marriage would be "a step backwards for humanity" (an 'anthropological regression')[3] and gravely harm us all - homosexuals included - because the health of the 'human ecology' depends on a healthy marital culture.[4] Such a culture draws

the two sexes together in married life and ensures that, as far as possible, children receive the gift of the contributions of both male and female parents, committed to each other and to them.^[5] Quoting from the Australian Bishops' Pastoral, *Don't Mess With Marriage*, and making it his own in his celebrated exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis insists that each of the spouses "contributes in a distinct way to the upbringing of a child. Respecting a child's dignity means affirming his or her need and natural right to have a mother and a father."^[6] The 'ideological colonisation' resulting from confusing presentations of sexuality and marriage disfigures God's plan for creation, denies children their natural rights, harms individuals and communities, and must be resisted.^[7] Yet sadly "many countries are witnessing a legal deconstruction of the family, tending to adopt models based almost exclusively on the autonomy of the individual will."^[8]

Far from revoking the Catholic Church's two-thousand-year-long insistence that (according to divine revelation and the natural law) marriage can only be between a man and a woman,^[ix] Pope Francis has been a strong advocate of that very position. Those claiming his support in their campaign for a Yes vote in the forthcoming plebiscite have either not read him or are deliberately misrepresenting him. To vote with Pope Francis is to VOTE NO.

^[1] Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Love in the Family* (2016), 33-34, 39-40 etc.; *Address to the Faculty and Students of the John Paul II Institute for Studies of Marriage and the Family*, 27 October 2016.

^[2] *Amoris Laetitia*, 52.

^[3] Edward Pentin, 'Pope repeats that same-sex 'marriage' is "anthropological regression' *National Catholic Register*, 3 January 2014.

^[4] Pope Francis, *General Audience*, 5 June 2013; *Address to the European Parliament*, Strasbourg, 25 November 2014; *Address to the Filipino Authorities and Diplomatic Corps*, Manila, 16 January 2015.

^[5] Pope Francis, *Address to the European Bishops Conference*, 3 October 2014; *Address to the European Parliament*, Strasbourg, 25 November 2014; *Address to the Filipino Authorities and Diplomatic Corps*, Manila, 16 January 2015; *Amoris Laetitia*, 81-83, 166ff, 172ff etc.

^[6] *Amoris Laetitia*, 172; cf. *Address to the International Colloquium on the Complementarity of Man and Woman*, Rome, 17 November 2014.

^[7] Likewise in Pope Francis, *Address to the International Colloquium on the Complementarity of Man and Woman*, Rome, 17 November 2014; *Address to Filipino Authorities and Diplomatic Corps*, Manila, 16 January 2015.

^[8] *Amoris Laetitia*, 53. ^[ix] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Considerations regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons*, 3 June 2003.