

Response of the Orthodox Christian Churches in Britain and Ireland to the Government Consultation on 'Same-Sex Marriage'

The Pan-Orthodox Episcopal Assembly for the British Isles and Ireland has considered the Government's proposed changes to the law relating to civil marriage and welcomes the opportunity to respond to the public consultation on this important matter.

We recognise that we live in a pluralistic society and we value the traditional tolerance of British society in which we enjoy freedom to practise and witness in accordance with our Orthodox Christian faith.

At the same time, we cannot be indifferent to the evident signs of the negative consequences of the weakening of the traditional understanding of family life that has undeniably occurred in the last fifty years or so. The tragically high rates of family breakdown and divorce, of teenage pregnancy and abortions and of single-parent families are painful to contemplate. The early sexualisation of children and indeed, the loss of childhood itself, fill us with concern for the future of our society. We know from long experience that 'the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children' (cf Ex. 20:5), since children without personal experience of stable family life find it very difficult to establish it for themselves and their children. We feel particularly that a very significant factor in this process is the conscious or unconscious rejection of the traditionally accepted roles of the husband as one who takes ultimate responsibility for the welfare of his family and of the wife as one who has a particular gift and care for the creation of a home environment in which children find the security and stability essential for their personal and spiritual development.

This is the sobering wider context for the proposed changes not only to the legal definition but to the very concept of marriage. The permanent and exclusive union of one man and one woman, open to the procreation of children and ensuring the continuity of the generations and the stability of family relationships, has been the object of special societal, religious and legal recognition by virtually all cultures for thousands of years. The proposal to give equivalent legal status to the unions of individuals whose relationship does not correspond to the natural complementarity of the sexes is one that we cannot view with equanimity. We believe that such a change would only further diminish the understanding of marriage in our society, which already tends to see it mainly in terms of a contract between two individuals based on their feelings for one another, with little intrinsic reference either to children or to the wider community. The proposed change is not, as is claimed, an extension of the high status and responsibilities of marriage to homosexual couples. Rather, it gives legal recognition to a radical change in the understanding of marriage itself that affects all married couples and hence society as a whole.

If the proposals are implemented, Orthodox Christians will find that this change to the social structure of British society will only increase the sense of spiritual disorientation that we feel as we see this country, along with the rest of the Western world, moving ever further away from its spiritual roots in the Christian tradition. Nor are we greatly reassured by the Government's insistence that the proposed changes will have no impact on the freedom of religious communities to maintain and practise their traditional understanding of marriage. The law shapes social attitudes as well as reflecting them. We do not live in isolation from the rest of society, so any change in the social concept of marriage will inevitably affect us, posing anew the question of the relationship between that which is legally acceptable and that which is morally right.

In summary, we believe that the complementary biological and psychical differences in the male and female expressions of human nature are intrinsic to the marriage relationship. God 'created man in his own image, ... male and female created he them (Gen. 1: 27), and established the covenant of marriage in which 'a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh' (Gen. 2:24). The wilful disregard of the divinely-inscribed patterns of human relationship cannot be expected to lead to anything good. We therefore, in the name of the Orthodox Christians of this country, together with those of all faiths and none who share our vision, call on the Government to abandon this ill-conceived and unnecessary project and to give urgent attention to practical measures designed to strengthen marriage and family life, which we understand to be the indispensable basis for a healthy and just society.