

CALLED TO STAND

for the

PROTECTION OF MARRIAGE

Fredericton, NB

October 18, 2003

Most Reverend J. Faber MacDonald Bishop of Saint John

We are standing here today, before this precious democratic institution, to call for the protection of marriage. That we have to do this is a call to our elected representatives, as well as to members of other institutions in society and in the Church, to wake up. To wake up and see the negative influence of popular culture, media and entertainment, in undermining the essential place, and role of marriage, for children, society, and the future of the world.¹ There is no source as authoritative as the Bible for presenting the centrality of marriage as a human institution.

Abraham Heschel, internationally known Jewish scholar, author, and activist theologian (1907-1972) gives us a profound insight into the way the Bible speaks to everyone, especially people of faith. He says:

“In a well composed work of art an idea of outstanding importance is not introduced haphazardly, but, like a king at an official ceremony, it is presented at a moment and in a way that will bring to light its authority and leadership. In the Bible, words are employed with exquisite care, particularly those which, like pillars of fire, lead the way in the far-flung system of the biblical world of meaning.”²

The biblical world of meaning on marriage is related to us in a unique way in the story of the wedding feast at Cana. (John 2:1-11). The story is filled with “pillar of fire” words and images.

First: it opens with the “pillar of fire” words: “On the third day” and continues: “there was a wedding feast in Cana in Galilee”. Set in context it invokes creation. In six days God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them. On the seventh day God rested.

In the gospel of John the beginning of Jesus’ ministry is given in six days. On the seventh day Jesus reveals His glory, suggesting that in Him the promised new creation has begun.

Second: “The mother of Jesus was there, and Jesus and his disciples were also invited”. The pillar of fire word is “invited”. The couple is central to the story. Nothing would have happened if the couple had not invited Jesus and His mother. The point is that the human couple, man and woman, is central to the human story. The first commandment given by God to humans is given to the first man and woman. The preservation of the human species is guaranteed in this command: “Increase and multiply and fill the earth”. (Gn.1:28)

Third: The next “pillar of fire” words: “The wine ran out”.

The couple probably were poor, and were forced to cut corners. In the culture of that day weddings were greatly anticipated. They were central for lifting people out of the daily boredom. Wine was central, and lots of it. To run out of wine was to add further shame and embarrassment to the poor couple. They would have been talked about with scorn for years in small town Cana.

This shame and embarrassment invokes the original shame of the first couple in the story of creation. They hardened their hearts towards God and took shame on themselves and all their descendants.

Jesus In His public ministry, when confronted by the Pharisees on the question of divorce, refers to this hardness of heart and shame. He says:

“Because of your hardness of heart, (Moses) allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal... but from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female, for this reason a man shall leave his

¹USCCB Statement on Marriage and Homosexual Unions, Origins, Vol. 33, No. 16, September 25, 2003.

²The Sabbath, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 19 Union Square W., NY 10003, ISBN: 0-374-51267-1, pg. 9.

father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” (Mark 10:2-16)

Jesus’ “pillar of fire” words “from the beginning of creation” remind us, and the whole world, that marriage is a human institution embedded in human nature.

“Marriage is a human reality, a natural institution that precedes all social, legal and religious systems. Marriage has existed since time immemorial (from the beginning of Creation). Marriage predates our present government or any other government, and predates as well the founding of the Church. Marriage is not the creature of the state or Church, and neither a government nor the Church has authority to change its nature. This form of life for couples has always been valued and protected as an institution because of its unique character, its way of ordering human relationships and its procreative potential.”³

I have worked pastorally with couples for over 40 years. I have yet to meet one couple who entered marriage because they wanted to be miserable for the rest of their lives. They all dreamed that their marriage would be the best marriage ever.

Statistics, however, reveal forces at work socially, politically, economically, and in other ways – sources that disillusion couples in their dreams causing hardness of heart to take root. Furthermore, there are social and political attitudes towards the couple which cause the shame of the original couple to continue to flow through human history.

Now our government, and our courts, are proceeding to inflict further shame by imposing two definitions of marriage that are inherently contradictory.

To add to the shame our government has side stepped its legitimate role and handed it to Courts.

In a genuine democracy, the Courts do not legislate. Enacting laws is a legislative function that is properly executed only by the elected representatives of the people.

We the people of Canada here in New Brunswick are telling you parliamentarians and judges that we are not going to meekly sit by; as you impose ‘so called’ gay marriage

You invoke the principles of equity, equality, autonomy and freedom of choice. With respect we suggest that:

“The state must not confuse equality with uniformity by simply substituting one for the other. Non discrimination does not require uniformity: it requires respect for diversity and differences. Society should value diversity. In the current context, refusing to establish the necessary distinctions leads to confusion and to the devaluing of diversity. It is not discriminatory to treat different realities differently.”⁴

What would be the value of the Canadian dollar if our financial system started to treat counterfeit money the same as real money? What would the loonie be worth? We all know the answer: Not very much.

The same is true for marriage. What would the institution of marriage be worth if our legal system started to treat counterfeit marriages the same as real marriages? The answer is: not very much. And we are talking about the core institution of our society.

No economic system, no political system, no society can afford to put counterfeit things on a par with the genuine article. This is true in the case of money, it is very much true in the case of marriage.

³CCCB - Preserving Marriage as the Uniting of Two Members of the Opposite Sex. Origins, Vol. 33, No.16, September 25, 2003, p. 260.

⁴Origins, Vol. 33, No.16, Pg. 260, September 25, 2003.

If we distinguish between true marriage and its false imitation, we are not being unfair to anyone, we are not being unjust, we are not denying anyone their basic human dignity or their rights as persons. We are simply making a judgement between truth and falsehood. We are simply telling it like it is.

“Gay marriage” proponents talk about “equality.” But if two things are not the same, it is not unjust if you do not treat them the same. When we talk about homosexual relationships vis-a-vis the marital union of a husband and wife, we are very much talking about apples and oranges. The principle of equality does not apply.

If you pursue this road of equality, eliminating all differences, you will strike an irreparable blow to one of the hard fought values Canadians hold dear, unity in diversity.

Politicians must never engage in moral compromise in the name of tolerance or pluralism. A well formed Christian conscience never allows one to vote for a political program or a law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals.

Let me repeat:

“The marriage of a man and woman is not just one form of association or institutional model among others. It is the institution on which society is founded. The relationship created by marriage between a woman and a man is a fundamental human reality which is at the basis of the social community.”⁵

Fourth: The next “pillar of fire” words is Jesus’ reply to his mother after she told him: “They have no more wine.” He said: “My hour has not yet come.” He is referring to the hour of His glorification.

Jesus changed the water into wine. He removed shame from the couple. He revealed His glory. His disciples believed in Him.

This is the faith dimension of marriage.

These “pillar of fire” words are addressed to His disciples and therefore to all Christian churches. As we address our elected representatives we, his disciples, must revisit Cana and allow Jesus the Risen Christ, and the couple at Cana, to challenge us. We must rediscover the essential ongoing relationship between the glorified Jesus and the married couple. We must rediscover, and proclaim, the love of Jesus for all couples; His desire to help them grow in fidelity, love and unity; His desire to prevent hardness of heart from taking root; and His desire to remove shame.

Couples must be led to rediscover the total beauty of God’s gift of sexual encounter rooted in their marriage covenant.

We must challenge our culture by raising together our voices against the separation of the sexual encounter from the committed relationship of marriage. Only when it is situated there does the sexual encounter become holy. Not only that, but marriage itself is made holy. For example when the sexual encounter is separated, when it becomes entertainment, or a multi-million dollar industry such as pornography, it is cheapened, desecrated, and the result is disorder, chaos, alienation, disillusionment, division, and sometimes death. All of which denigrates the dignity of marriage as a human institution.

Respecting the communion of our respective traditions, we must get serious about preparation for a marriage commitment exploring the possibility of remote, proximate, and immediate stages. We must also explore ways of ongoing follow up, enabling couples to place their precious relationship at the service of the community, Church community and civil community. The community is to be at the service of this divine reality and not vice versa.

This could be a new beginning in honoring what “God joins together”, and not just assume that joining together will

⁵Ibid, page 262.

continue automatically.

Fifth: The “pillar of fire” words spoken by the steward to the poor bridegroom even though they are in the form of a scolding, are filled with hope.

“Everyone serves good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have had plenty to drink. But you have kept the good wine until now.”

Jesus changing water into wine symbolizes the radical essential change that transpires when Jesus anoints and consecrates this relationship. The water of human love is changed into the new wine of divine love. Divine love gets better and better not only in this world but for ever and ever.

As the Canadian Catholic Bishops have emphasized:

“Even if the love between and man and a woman is imperfect, it is always called to manifest in a tangible way what Jesus revealed in abundance: the irrevocable love of God that is forever linked to our humanity... Married couples take part in this mystery. They become living signs of it. The sacrament of marriage is a sign of the union between Christ and His Church.”⁶ St. Paul reminds us of this in his letter to the Ephesians: (Eph. 5:31-32)

“This social and conjugal unit – by its binding love, by its inherent ability to bear children and by the ensuing responsibility of father and mother to care for their children – not only enriches society, but is its very cornerstone.”⁷

My dear Parliamentarians and judges: In the biblical world of meaning it is the cornerstone that allows all other stones to have their place, keeps the whole structure together, and gives it strength, affording protection to all who dwell within.

We beg you to think long and deeply before you begin tampering with this cornerstone.

⁶ibid. p 261

⁷ibid p. 263