

AMOR HUMANIS

A Pastoral Letter on Human Love

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

HUMAN LOVE takes many diverse forms. At its simplest level, it is manifested in the attraction between two people to the extent that they wish to spend time together, take part in activities together either by themselves or with friends, and are inspired by that mutual love either by simple words and deeds, or by the deeper action of the act of lovemaking itself.

Let me state from the outset that the position of the National Catholic Church is quite clear on this matter: if two people are in love, and it does not matter if it is a man and a woman, a man and a man, or a woman and a woman, then the Church will do all it can to support them and to help them nurture and cherish that love with the help of our all-loving God, the source of all grace and goodness, who made us all in His own image and likeness.

Over the last few weeks there has been much in the press and the media around the whole issue of same-sex love and marriage.

First of all, we have seen about the issue of the Employment Tribunal case between the Rev. Canon Jeremy Pemberton, an Anglican Priest, and the Church of England. I do not wish to recapitulate the details of a case which has been widely reported, but suffice to say that the case was brought by Canon Jeremy following a chain of events which started with his being refused Permission to Officiate by the then acting Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham, Bishop Richard Inwood, for the simple reason that Canon Jeremy had legally married his same-sex partner.

Two things have struck me about this case. First of all, whilst Bishop Inwood was giving evidence to the Tribunal, the Chairman asked him a question which, in its

simplest terms wondered if, given that Canon Jeremy's civil marriage was not doing harm to anyone, was not the Church of England's position "a busted flush?" Similarly, I am left wondering if Bishop Inwood wasn't left with the feeling during and after all of this that he had basically been 'dumped on from a great height' and that there had not, in some way, been an element of buck-passing going on? One has to have the greatest of sympathy for Bishop Inwood: after all, no-one wants to be dragged out of retirement to be put through all of this sort of thing.

There has then been the minor row over the blessing of the York Pride Parade by Canon Michael Smith of York Minster. Again, I won't go into a lengthy recapitulation of the details which have been widely reported in the press, including *Pink News* but the whole spat even got mentioned in the House of Commons and referred to by the Speaker who described the Rev. Melvin Tinker, who had publicly compared homosexuality with pædophilia, as "misguided" and "obviously a rather blinkered fellow, to put it mildly".

Compare this with the attitude of the retired Archbishop of Cape Town, Desmond Tutu. He has publicly declared that

I would not worship a God who is homophobic and that is how deeply I feel about this. I would refuse to go to a homophobic heaven. No, I would say sorry, I mean I would much rather go to the other place.¹

But why do the mainstream Churches get themselves so wound up about homosexuality? And why do they dare to think that it is any of their business what consenting adults do in the privacy of their own homes?

During the course of the recent referendum in Ireland, the Roman Catholic Church went to great lengths to instruct, maybe even order, its congregations against amending the Constitution to include same-sex marriage. Yet the amendment was passed by a fairly thumping majority. The RC Church in particular appears to have a mediæval mentality whereby if a Priest tells a congregation to jump, they should ask, "how high?"

The days when the Church, along with the Barons, held sway just about everywhere are gone. Many clergy of the RC Church seem to forget that the institution is there to serve the faithful, not the other way round. One of the titles of the Pope, the Bishop of Rome is *Servus Servorum Dei*—Servant of the Servants of God. And so it should be that all clergy, Deacons, Priests, and Bishops alike, should regard themselves in the same way: as servants, not to be served.

¹"Desmond Tutu Would Prefer Hell Over A Homophobic Heaven" at *The Huffington Post* (26 July 2013) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/07/26/desmond-tutu-hell-homophobia_n_3661120.html

Is it no wonder, then, that where an institution preoccupies itself with so-called moral issues of contraception, divorce and re-marriage, and same-sex relationships whilst getting it completely and utterly wrong on transgender issues; yet has dragged its heels for so long over the scandals of clerical sexual abuse and the physical and mental abuse of children—it is increasingly being seen by so many as becoming an irrelevance? An old African proverb says “I cannot hear a word you are saying for what you are, shouts so loudly in my ears.”²

Last weekend saw the annual Pride parade and festival in London. I wasn’t able to be there myself, but I have no doubt that the Christian protestors were there waving their placards quoting carefully selected phrases from the Bible. Yet they always manage to leave the most important one out:

Love one another as I have loved you.

John 13:34, 35

Now I am not suggesting for a minute that Jesus Christ Himself was gay, but He made this point to emphasise the fact that He gave up His own life for us, dying on the Cross in order to bring us salvation: the ultimate act of love.

Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

John 15:13

And it is that freedom to love that sets us apart from other societies. Apart from the restriction placed in terms of consanguinity and polygamy, we are free to marry whomsoever we choose—in most of the United Kingdom and Ireland. I say “most”; the one exception being Northern Ireland where, due to the stranglehold one particular party (and the religious denomination to which most of its members belong) has on the Northern Ireland Assembly, (legally recognised) same-sex marriage neither exists in the province, nor are same-sex marriages legally contracted elsewhere in the world recognised as such—they become civil partnerships on entering Northern Ireland. As this is a “devolved issue” there is nothing that HM Government in the United Kingdom can do about it, short of dissolving the Assembly and returning to direct rule. One can only hope and pray that the day will come when Northern Ireland is able to move to a more enlightened situation under its own steam.

That freedom to love and to marry “the one” has of course come now to the entire United States of America, with the Supreme Court of the United States issuing its landmark judgement towards the end of last month. Had we the equivalent here in the UK, I daresay the whole Northern Ireland situation would be different. It is to be welcomed that the High Court in Belfast has given leave to two couples to seek a judicial review of the ban on same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland.³

²Also attributed to Ralph Waldo Emerson by President John F. Kennedy

³“Gay marriage: Two NI couples seek judicial review of same-sex ban”, BBC News online, 25 June

One looks at the great strides the principle of equality in love has made over the last few years and one doesn't see God sending great bolts of lightning down from the heavens in retribution; one sees rainbows—quite literally. It has never been a question of “redefining marriage”, even though that has been done many times over the centuries, but of affirming rights enshrined both in the *UN Declaration on Human Rights* and the *European Convention on Human Rights* here in the UK and Ireland, and those enshrined in the US Constitution for our friends on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

So I ask you to keep a number of things in your prayers:

1. That the freedoms to love and to marry whomever one chooses will be extended soon to Northern Ireland;
2. To thank Almighty God for His goodness to us; and
3. To pray for all those who are persecuted, be that for their sexuality, gender identity, race, or religion, wherever they may be.

‡ Petrus Anglianensis

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