

Comment - Marriage Referendum: a personal perspective from Rt Rev Dr Paul Colton

As we are meeting very much in the wake of the outcome of the recent Marriage Referendum debates, vote and outcome, I do want to share first, some personal reflections about it too. That is what they are, personal reflections, and I recognise that within the room we have more than a hundred such personal reflections, and perhaps even more, some of which will be very different from my own, and others not dissimilar to mine. Such is the nature of living in a human community with a diversity of experiences, life journeys and perspectives.

We meet two Saturdays after the declaration of the outcome of that plebiscite the day before. It will come as no surprise to you that I, personally, was delighted and relieved by the outcome. I know that there are people among my brothers and sisters in Christ in this Diocese, and throughout the Church of Ireland who will have shared these feelings, as well as many who do not. It's important to remember that each of us is, in our own way, endeavouring to be faithful to our Lord's call to follow him, and to discern what is the Good News for our time. We are all trying to give expression to what his love, truth and justice are to mean in our day. It is this focus on the centrality of Jesus Christ that unites us, and demands of us respectful and generous engagement each with the other.

Pause for Thought

Whichever view we took on the referendum proposition, the result gives all of us in the Church pause for thought. As I say, I know that in this room, as throughout our Church of Ireland in this Republic, there were people who were on either side of this debate. People who journey in faith, and who, each day, do their utmost to put the same Jesus Christ, the living Word of God, and the written word, at the heart of their lives, came to different conclusions and voted in different ways.

We cannot know precisely the number of Christians who voted yes or no. But given that, by their own self-affiliation and self-definition in the Census 2011, Christians make up by far the largest faith group in the State, we can surmise that they were among those who voted Yes in hugely significant numbers. It is undeniable too that some Christians were vigorous in articulating arguments on the 'no' side. On both sides of the argument, social media became, in some instances, a cauldron of extremes.

In spite of the advance polls, the outcome came as a surprise even to the 'Yes' side. Brian, one young gay campaigner I know of, writing in a recently published magazine article, wrote: 'Up until polling day we were convinced that we would just snatch a victory by the skin of our teeth.' The result caught many unawares. Even late on the afternoon of the poll itself I saw 'yes' campaigners on social media fearing that the turnout was too low to result in a 'yes' outcome.

The first constitutional referendum that I can recall exercising my vote in was the 8th Amendment to the Constitution – the right to life of the unborn – in October 1983. I remember well the heat of that debate, and of the four abortion-related referendums since. Those together with the two relating to divorce stand out in my memory for the vigorous level of public engagement and debate: until this year's referendum on marriage equality.

It was an energetic public debate and, for many, it was bruising. If it was difficult for those engaged in the debate on either side of a hypothetical proposition, how much more must it have demanded emotionally from those most affected, LGBT people themselves. This is where, whatever our viewpoint, as a caring Church, we need to put ourselves in other people's shoes.

For my part, I was profoundly uncomfortable as a citizen of the State, adjudicating, as I saw it, on the human and civil rights, the place in society, the equality or otherwise, of another group of people, a minority: LGBT people. I note that earlier this week, other commentators have questioned whether 'Rule by Referendum' is the best way to make decisions (*Irish Times* – Liam Weeks on 2nd June 2015).

For me, however, the issue is not with referendums *per se*, but with what we feel the need to include in our Constitution.

I know from speaking with many lesbian and gay people that, while they had no option but to acquiesce in the declared necessity for a referendum as part of our constitutional process, many did feel, nonetheless, as if their very *esse*, their being, their existence, their identity, were being deliberated upon, talked about. As a result they were objectified, sometimes in a very dehumanising way. I spoke to some who, understandably, became very agitated and angry about this. For vulnerable people it was an emotionally destabilising time. That is why the readiness and courage of so many people among them to

come forward and to tell their own very ordinary, and sometimes very difficult, stories was hugely important to all of us. In part this, I believe, is why too, I believe, we saw such a spontaneous outflow of relief, emotion and jubilation in those televised pictures from Dublin Castle, what one correspondent to the *Irish Times* referred to as 'a secular pentecost'; not only because all eyes had been on people for the previous few months, but because, for many, the amassed emotions of accumulated years of marginalisation and stigmatisation, memories of hurt and suffering, especially prior to 1993, suffering in which the churches have been complicit – all of these was lanced, as it were, for many in that moment.

The part Christians play in these times

Christians must be to the fore in exposing homophobia and in countering it. The love, compassion and message of Jesus Christ, radical and inclusive in his time, should drive us too, in relation to all issues in our own time, to be advocates for, and agents of, justice, equality and human rights throughout our world. Aren't these integral to the marks of mission? The marks of mission: the proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom, teaching, baptising and nurturing new believers, respond to human need by loving service, seeking to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation; and, to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

In the euphoria of one side – the 'yes' side' of the Marriage Referendum debate, or the dismay of the 'no' side, it would be all too easy to take recourse to a naive analysis of what it might all mean about religious adherence and the outlook for institutional religion in Ireland. As I said, it doesn't take much scrutiny of our Census figures on religion to surmise, however, that undoubtedly huge numbers of professing Christians, including members of the Church of Ireland, voted 'Yes.' Christians were undeniably key to the 'No' vote also.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the same voting pattern would automatically be replicated in a different referendum on other hotly debated issues in our society. As we move forward in the churches we can be assured that there are and will continue to be issues on which, in faith, we will be united or divided: abortion, gender issues, other aspects of sexuality, economic policy, political engagement, conflict and military engagement, peace-keeping, the plight of ancient Christian communities in the Middle East; environmental issues, climate change, the type of investments we as a

church make; the things that other people raise here at Diocesan Synod and at General Synod.

We have much to learn from listening to one another, learning from one another, and embracing the breadth of experience that lies within and is innate to our Anglican approach. For example, listening to Stephen Trew from the Diocese of Dromore at General Synod recently, I have begun to dialogue with him on social media, and I am endeavouring to educate myself more about the arguments about divestment of churches from fossil fuels, including the Operation Noah report on climate change called *Bright Now: towards fossil free churches*, as well as the Anglican Communion Environmental Network report, *The World is our Host: A call to urgent action for climate justice* to which Stephen pointed us.

+ *Excerpt from address by the Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross to the Diocesan Synod 6th June 2015*