

Archbishop Nichols responds to critics of his civil unions approach



Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster is being accused of defying Vatican guidelines on homosexual civil partnerships. In response, he says he is simply trying to defend the “profound human good” of traditional marriage.

“We’ve got to find the ways of speaking to people about the positive values of marriage as it’s always been understood, while not getting boxed off by somehow being accused of being homophobic,” Archbishop Nichols told CNA on Dec. 1 in Rome.

“The convictions about marriage mean that this is not something that the Church has invented nor the State has invented. And therefore it is not, as it were, at the disposal of the Church nor the State, if you like, to change,” he said.

The Church believes that marriage is “part of what is best in human nature,” he added.

Archbishop Nichols recently came under fire from some Catholics for the way he explained his position of same-sex civil partnerships at a Nov. 26 press conference that followed a meeting of the English and Welsh bishops.

According to the English religious journal *The Tablet*, the archbishop remarked that “(w)e would want to emphasize that civil partnerships actually provide a structure in which people of the same sex who want a lifelong relationship (and) a lifelong partnership can find their place and protection and legal provision.”

Same-sex civil partnerships became law in the United Kingdom in 2004. In 2003, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued guidelines that stated, “respect for homosexual persons cannot lead in any way to approval of homosexual behavior or to legal recognition of homosexual unions.” It also stressed that “all Catholics are obliged to oppose the legal recognition of

homosexual unions.”

Well-known Catholic commentator William Oddie wrote in the Nov. 30 edition of the Catholic Herald that “Archbishop Nichols says he is in favor of gay civil unions: but that legally includes the right to adopt. So why did we lose our adoption agencies?”

“Now we are told, by the chairman of the bishops’ conference, that the English Church supports civil unions between homosexual persons, unions which have been given the legal right to adopt children,” Oddie continued.

When Archbishop Nichols was asked by CNA if the bishops of England were contradicting the Vatican’s guidelines, he said that the bishops have tried “to recognize the reality of the legal provision in our country of an agreement, a partnership, with many of the same legal safeguards as in marriage.” He further explained that while the bishops recognize the existence of civil partnerships, they also “believe that that is sufficient,” and that they should not be placed on par with marriage.

The issue of same-sex marriage has come to the fore in the United Kingdom in recent months. The Scottish government is currently wrapping up a public consultation on whether to legally permit such unions. A similar consultation in England & Wales will take place next spring.

“Clearly, respect must be shown to those who in the situation in England use a civil partnership to bring stability to a relationship,” the archbishop said, qualifying that while “equality is very important and there should be no unjust discrimination,” that “commitment plus equality do not equal marriage.”

Archbishop Nichols said the key distinction between civil partnerships and marriage is that the former does not “in law contain a required element of sexual relationships.”

“Same-sex partnerships are not marriage because they have no root in a sexual relationship, which marriage does,” he explained. “And that’s the distinction that I think it’s important for us to understand, that marriage is built on the sexual partnership between a man and a woman which is open to children to their nurture and education.”

So while the bishops of England and Wales “respect the existence of same-sex partnerships in law,” he said, “the point we are at now is to say that they are not the same as marriage.”

Archbishop Nichols praised the launch earlier this week of a high-profile campaign in Scotland to protect traditional marriage, entitled Scotland for Marriage. “That’s a very positive message in that title and I’m quite sure that’s what we’ve got to do, too.”

The Westminster archbishop also wants to “explain and expound as clearly as we can,” the “particular qualities of marriage,” which, he believes, are “widely understood,” in the United Kingdom.

He recalled that while attending the recent Royal Wedding between Prince William and Catherine Middleton the cheering of the crowds in the London streets could be heard inside Westminster Abbey on two occasions: when Catherine said “I do,” and when they were pronounced “man and wife.”

“So there was a wide public, instinctive recognition of what makes a marriage, and I think that is the public understanding that we want to bring to the surface,” Archbishop Nichols said.

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