

**Press Statement by Bishop Denis Nulty, Chair of the Council for Marriage & Family of the
Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference on the divorce referendum**

Article 41.3.1 of the *Constitution of Ireland* proclaims that ‘the State pledges itself to guard with special care the institution of Marriage, on which the Family is founded, and to protect it from attack.’ Stable marriages and relationships contribute significantly to a happy and stable society.

Following last August’s celebration of the World Meeting of the Families and the visit of Pope Francis to Ireland, the Council for Marriage and the Family published *A Word of Truth and Hope*. In it we recognise, as Pope Francis does, that people are called to live their married lives in the reality of the world with all its opportunities and its challenges. For a wide diversity of reasons, even with the best efforts of the husband and wife, marriage sometimes reaches a crisis point.

A Word of Truth and Hope acknowledges that “there is possibly no greater loneliness than to share a home with a person with whom one can no longer share life or love. Sometimes with great courage and support from those around them, it is possible for a couple to continue their married life and even to deepen their love. Sometimes, however, marriage ends in divorce. Our experience would suggest that many divorced people have no wish to remarry. Many, inspired by faith, seek to remain faithful to the promises which they made before God, while others, eventually, do remarry civilly or enter into new relationships”. Our understanding of the Church as a “loving mother” and the parish as a “family of families” endorses our pastoral approach as Church in accompanying people in the brokenness and pain of their situation.

Marriage is essential and fundamental for the good of society worldwide. It is imperative that we continue to work together to promote marriage and family. The objective of the proposed referendum is not to support marriage, rather to liberalise divorce. For this reason it is important to reflect deeply on the implications of this referendum which seeks to expedite the dissolution of marriage. The common good would be better served by supporting and resourcing couples and families in preparation for, and during marriage.

The apparent absence of empirical evidence underpinning the Government’s referendum proposal, that there should be a reduction of the current time limit before divorce becomes an option, is a matter of concern. A culture of support for marriage is not created by simply reducing, or removing, the waiting period before the initiation of proceedings leading to divorce. So, what can the government do to help marriage?

We believe that the incidence of marriage breakdown and divorce could be reduced through the introduction of socio-economic policies which support the family and through long-term education strategies which promote values such as fidelity and commitment. While this would cost money, the human and economic cost of breakdown and divorce, both for the couple and for their children is a far greater cost.

Also Accord, the pastoral agency of the Catholic Church, supporting marriage and family life offers courses to women and men who are preparing for the Sacrament of Marriage. Feedback from Accord indicates that the experience of couples who have undertaken a marriage preparation course has been very positive and this has benefits for their marriage and family life. The Government should recommit resources to marriage preparation and invest

resources into marriage enrichment. Both initiatives will sustain marriages into the future and lead to great dividends for wider society.