

Sydney cardinal: Priests have right to discuss politics when preaching

PERTH, Australia – Cardinal George Pell of Sydney has defended the right of priests to speak against the legalization of same-sex marriage from the pulpit.

Responding to concerns expressed by Australian Marriage Equality, which campaigns for same-sex marriage, about “undue involvement by the clergy in a debate about the reform of a civil law,” Cardinal Pell said that while it is inappropriate for priests or bishops to serve as legislators or decision-makers in government, they enjoy the same rights to freedom of speech and to participate in public debate as everyone else.

Cardinal Pell told members of the organization that he would meet with them to discuss marriage if the organization would disavow publicly the claim that opposition to same-sex marriage is a form of prejudice or discrimination and acknowledge that it is usually based on reasonable grounds.

Peter Furness, Australian Marriage Equality acting national convener, said in December that the church’s “instructions to ordinary Catholics to lobby against marriage equality is a breach of the division between church and state.”

He said that “allowing same-sex civil marriages will not change the church’s definition of marriage.”

“Many Catholics will rightly wonder why the church instructs them to lobby against two people making a lifelong commitment, when poverty, war and the plight of refugees remain such critical local and global issues,” Furness said in a statement on his organization’s website Dec. 20.

Earlier, the Australian Catholic Bishops’ Conference urged its members to ask their priests to sign petitions and contact politicians to protect marriage.

Furness expressed concern that campaigning by the church or priests against same-sex marriage would incite discrimination and prejudice.

Cardinal Pell responded that “we have no intention of doing anything to encourage prejudice or unjust discrimination against nonheterosexual people,” adding that the materials circulated to parishes have been “carefully prepared to focus on the fundamental question of marriage and to avoid any language that is even remotely inflammatory.”

“For the Catholic Church, the issue of same-sex marriage is not primarily about homosexuality or discrimination, but about the nature of marriage and the good things it makes possible because of its nature, for spouses, for families and for the community,” the cardinal said.