

# Married Sunday, fired Monday: Churches threaten to dismiss staff who wed same-sex partners

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Australia's Catholic church is threatening to fire teachers, nurses and other employees who marry their same-sex partner if gay marriage is legalised, in a dramatic move led by the country's most senior Catholic.

Archbishop of Melbourne Denis Hart, speaking exclusively to Fairfax Media, pointedly warned the church's 180,000 employees they were expected to uphold its teachings "totally", and defiance would be treated "very seriously".

"I would be very emphatic that our schools, our parishes exist to teach a Catholic view of marriage," he said. "Any words or actions which work contrary to that would be viewed very seriously.

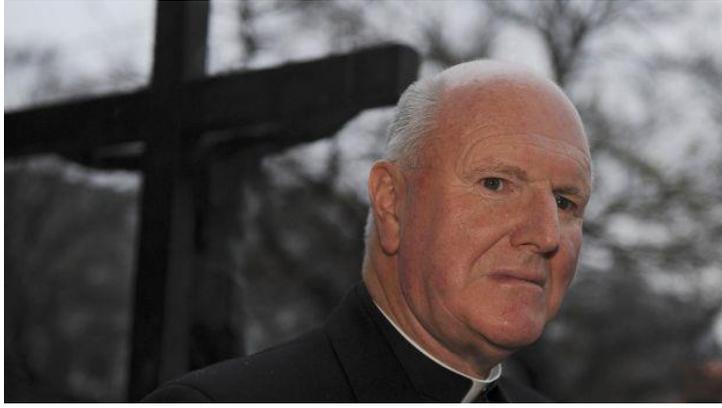
"Our teachers, our parish employees are expected totally to uphold the Catholic faith and what we believe about marriage. People have to see in words and in example that our teaching of marriage is underlined.

"We shouldn't be slipping on that," said Archbishop Hart, who also chairs the powerful Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. He said individual hiring and firing decisions "are best dealt with on the local scene".

Archbishop Hart was backed up by Archbishop Timothy Costelloe, chair of the Bishops Commission for Catholic Education, who cautioned teachers against "undermining" their schools' values if same-sex marriage became law.

Archbishop Costelloe said parents who sent their children to a Catholic school wanted them educated within a Catholic framework, of which marriage was a vital part.

"In accepting a role in a Catholic school, staff will recognise their responsibility to conduct themselves in such a way as not to undermine the fundamental ethos of the school," he told Fairfax Media.



Archbishop of Melbourne, Denis Hart, who is also chair of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference. *Photo: Joe Armao*

"Like all other employers, the Catholic Church should be able to ensure its values are upheld by those who choose to work for the organisation."

The Anglican Church, while declining to comment directly on employees, also emphasised the importance of protecting religious freedom and warned safeguards had "quickly unravelled" overseas.

Under Australia's anti-discrimination laws, churches already enjoy wide-ranging exemptions allowing them to hire and fire on the basis of sexual orientation, marital status and other characteristics.

While LGBTI employees are often tolerated by church employers, a same-sex wedding may be considered a public denunciation of church teachings on marriage.

Father Frank Brennan, chief executive of Catholic Social Services Australia, this week defended the ability for church schools to refuse employment to a same-sex attracted person, and for aged care facilities to reject a married gay couple.

Writing in *The Guardian*, he indicated he could vote "yes" in the upcoming postal survey, but wanted the church's right to discriminate maintained.



Father Frank Brennan, chief executive of Catholic Social Services Australia, supported the church's right to hire and fire at will. *Photo: supplied*

However, Catholic Health Australia, the country's largest non-government, non-profit health group, distanced itself from those threats.

Chief executive Suzanne Greenwood told Fairfax Media she would not expect doctors and nurses to adhere so strictly to the church's teachings, though conceded it may be different for teachers.

"We're not converting people to Catholicism," she said. "It's not really relevant to the jobs people are performing within the care environment at a hospital or an aged care facility.

"It's not like people are currently screened [for sexuality or marital status]. I would see absolutely no reason why that would change."

Religious organisations have had exemptions to the Sex Discrimination Act since its inception in 1984. Human Rights Commissioner Ed Santow backed the act and said any attempt to legalise same-sex marriage would need to maintain those exemptions.

"It's a matter for each religious organisation how far they want to take that exemption," Mr Santow said. "Most religious organisations are very careful and respectful of the diversity of our community."

According to a 2015 paper by the Australian Catholic Council for Employment Relations, more than 180,000 Australians work for the Catholic church in some respect - about 2 per cent of the workforce.

Bishop Michael Stead, chairman of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney's Religious Freedom Reference Group, declined to answer directly whether the Anglican Church would seek to dismiss employees.

In a statement, he called for the maintenance of current exemptions to anti-discrimination law, and said attempts to legislate same-sex marriage in Australia so far were "manifestly deficient" in protecting civil and religious freedoms.

"The experience in countries where marriage has been redefined has been a quick and steady erosion of freedom of speech, conscience and belief," Bishop Stead said.

"The fact that promised safeguards for freedom of religion have quickly unravelled overseas should serve as a warning to Australians."

The US has seen a number of high-profile cases of employees being fired after wedding a same-sex partner, and the scenario was dramatised in the 2014 Ira Sachs film *Love Is Strange*.

In June, former parish music director Colin Collette lost a lawsuit against the Archdiocese of Chicago after he was fired upon becoming engaged to his male partner.

Lyle Shelton, managing director of the Australian Christian Lobby and one of the leading public campaigners for the "no" side, also defended the power of Christian organisations to dismiss staff who married a same-sex partner.

"Religious organisations should have the same freedoms as political parties to ensure that staff share their ethos," he said.

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/married-sunday-fired-monday-churches-threaten-to-dismiss-staff-who-wed-samesex-partners-20170817-gxy4ds.html>