RESPONSE OF THE

NORTHERN CATHOLIC BISHOPS

TO THE

MARRIAGE AND CIVIL PARTNERSHIP BILL

(As introduced by the Northern Ireland Assembly)

10th June 2026

The Solemnising of Marriage:

As pastors, with responsibility for promoting the beauty, joy and good of marriage, as an institution central to the common good of society, we are glad to have this opportunity to comment on the *Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill* presently under consideration by the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Catholic Church holds that marriage is a sacred institution, divinely ordained and solemnly vowed between one man and one woman, for life. We believe human reason affirms marriage as the cornerstone of society, with a unique role in the generation and upbringing of children. Consistent with this understanding of the centrality of marriage to society and to the good of couples themselves, the Church understands marriage to have the dignity and character of a Sacrament, instituted, willed and sustained by Christ himself.

As a living and celebrating community, the Catholic Church will always seek to uphold this understanding of marriage. We invite every State that values freedom to recognise and facilitate the right of Catholics, and of the Church herself, to promote, support and celebrate marriage in accordance with her own doctrine, irrespective of any other definition or approach to marriage accepted or promoted by the civil legislature. As part of this sacred right, and respect for the human right to freedom of worship and religion, it is appropriate for the Church to expect the State to respect its right to determine how, when and where the Sacrament of Marriage may be celebrated by the Church, and by whom. This includes the right to provide preparation and pastoral support for the Sacrament of Marriage in accordance with the Church's own laws and beliefs.

It is therefore appropriate for us to insist that nothing in the proposed Bill will undermine these rights, either directly or indirectly. We seek reassurance in this regard. We will continue to monitor the progress and implementation of the Bill carefully, and, where necessary, will raise and pursue concerns in light of this fundamental criterion.

We also believe that the monogamous and life-long nature of marriage, understood by the Church as between a man and a woman, and its vital contribution to society through the stable upbringing of children, are truths affirmed by natural law and human reason, without requiring reference specifically to religious belief. We therefore hold that it is in the interests of the State itself to uphold and promote an understanding of marriage as solemn, monogamous and life-long, in service of the common good.

In this context, we wish to express our concern that the proposed Bill does not provide sufficient clarity or definition around the nature of the "belief" systems that will fall within its scope. This lack of clarity gives rise to a real risk that frivolous or deliberately provocative claims to "belief" may emerge, as well as sincere but irrational claims which could undermine the rational basis in natural law for the State's own traditional understanding of marriage as monogamous and life-long.

In our view, the Bill does not yet provide adequate safeguards for the common good, nor for the State's own interest in protecting marriage as a fundamental building block of society. Important questions remain unanswered. What belief system will form the basis for recognition of a belief marriage under this legislation? Who will decide this, and by what criteria? Which beliefs will be included or excluded? Is there an accepted legal definition of "belief" for the purposes proposed in the Bill? These are matters on which the Bill is currently silent.

To permit the Bill to proceed in the absence of appropriate definitions will be to introduce an unintended subjectivism which opens the door to "beliefs " which are not philosophically underpinned or based on reason. Consequently the institution of marriage is further undermined.

While in the Smyth case the Court concluded that "humanism was an authentic belief system, the BHA an authentic belief body, and a humanist marriage a manifestation of that belief", it may not be so straightforward to assess other claims of association with a belief system. Greater clarity is therefore essential if the legislation is to avoid uncertainty, inconsistency, or unintended consequences.

The Minimum Age for Marriage:

In respect of the proposed change to the age of marriage, we support the proposal to raise the minimum age for marriage to eighteen.

Sufficient human experience, capacity and maturity are fundamental requirements for entering into a life-long, monogamous relationship in our current culture. We also support the proposal as a matter of harmonising legislation across this island. The current position is actively subject to exploitation, with couples crossing the border to take advantage of the different minimum-age levels.

+Eamon Martin
Archbishop of Armagh

+Larry Duffy
Bishop of Clogher

+Alan Mc Guckian SJ
Bishop of Down and Connor

+Donal McKeown
Bishop of Derry

+Michael Router
Auxiliary Bishop of Armagh