

Ireland gay-marriage vote a 'reality check' for Catholic leaders

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DUBLIN—In many ways, Ireland remains a heavily Catholic country.

Yet on Friday (May 22) voters approved a constitutional change that gives same-sex couples the same marriage rights as heterosexual couples.

“We must not move into the denial of the realities,” Dublin’s archbishop Diarmuid Martin said after the vote. “The church has a huge task to get its message across to young people. [It] needs to do a reality check.”

He had voted against the measure.

“I appreciate how gay and lesbian men and women feel on this day, he said. “They feel this is something enriching the way they live. It’s a social revolution.”

Sixty-two percent of voters rejected the nation’s traditional social conservatism to make Ireland the first nation in the world to approve full marriage rights to same-sex couples by popular referendum. Eighteen other countries have legalized gay marriage through legislation or the courts.

Ireland seems an unlikely place to make history on the issue given the Catholic Church’s dominant role in the country and its open opposition to passage of the referendum. About 85 percent of people polled in Ireland’s census in 2011 identified as Catholic. The church runs more than 90 percent of Ireland’s public schools. Twice a day, church bells ring out resoundingly on state radio and television to remind Ireland’s devoted to recite the Angelus prayer.

In one concession to the Catholic clergy, the measure does not extend an automatic right for gay couples to be married in a church.

The Iona Institute, a conservative Catholic think tank, said in a statement, “We hope the government will address the concerns voters on the ‘No’ side have about the implications for freedom of religion and freedom of conscience.”