

# Bills move Maryland closer to same-sex marriage

When Gov. Martin J. O'Malley signed two domestic partnership bills into law last month, many pro-marriage advocates believe he put Maryland on a path toward the inevitable legalization of same-sex marriage. It's a course they worry will lead to the degradation of traditional marriage and the weakening of societal values unless citizens stand up to stop it.

Richard J. Dowling, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, was one of the leading opponents of the bills - one of which grants unmarried couples the same status as married couples for medical decision-making and another that gives domestic partners the same property tax privileges as married couples.

Long before the California Supreme Court struck down a ban on that state's ban on same-sex marriage May 15, lawmakers passed domestic partnership laws similar to the ones emerging in Maryland, Mr. Dowling said.

It won't be long, Mr. Dowling said, before Maryland lawmakers grant more rights to unmarried opposite-sex and same-sex couples that will give them all the same legal privileges as married couples.

If the Maryland high court then follows California's example and nixes a ban on same-sex marriage, it would take a constitutional amendment to define marriage as being between one man and one woman.

The Maryland court upheld the state's current definition of marriage as being between a man and a woman in a Sept. 18 ruling, but said lawmakers could change the law to allow same-sex civil unions or marriage.

"Given the present makeup of the Maryland legislature and despite strong popular support for traditional marriage, there is virtually no chance that this (an amendment defining marriage as between a man and a woman) would come to pass," said Mr. Dowling, noting that an amendment must first pass the General Assembly before going to a vote of the people.

Sen. James E. DeGrange Sr., a Democrat representing Anne Arundel County, called the passage and signing of the domestic partnership bills “the old camel’s nose under the tent.”

“I’m concerned we’re on a path that’s going to be very difficult to turn around,” said Sen. DeGrange, who had contacted the governor’s office to voice his opposition to the bills.

“There is the real possibility that this is the beginning of same-sex couples getting married in other states coming here and filing suits in the courts,” he said. “It’s a very messy situation.”

Del. William J. Frank, a Republican representing Baltimore County, called the passage of the bills part of an “ongoing and deliberative process of chipping away and further weakening the traditional definition of marriage at a time we should be working on strengthening marriage.”

Those opposed to same-sex marriage need to make their voices heard, according to Del. Frank. Last session, the delegate received 350 postcards from same-sex marriage proponents, but only a handful of letters from opponents, he said.

“I do think momentum is building for same-sex marriage – a concept that would have been unthinkable a decade ago,” he said. “We have to educate people on the issue.”

Laurie Przybysz, archdiocesan coordinator of marriage and family enrichment, said the drive to recognize same-sex marriage stems from a “charitable impulse” not to be discriminatory.

“But marriage as we understand it has always been something more than a commitment between friends – even lifelong friends,” she said. “It’s a sign of God’s covenant with the people. If all committed relationships are the same and there’s no special symbol of marriage, then there’s a big loss spiritually for society.”

Monsignor James Farmer, pastor of St. Ursula in Parkville, called marriage “one of the foundations of our society.” He is urging his parishioners and all Catholics to contact their lawmakers and speak up before it’s too late.

“Marriage is a relationship between a man and a woman as God intended it to be,” Monsignor Farmer said. “If same-sex marriage becomes legal in this state, we have had an enormous collapse in moral values.”

A day before a signing ceremony in Annapolis, Christine Hansen, the governor’s deputy press secretary, told The Catholic Review the governor respects the views of the Catholic Church on the marriage issue.

“But, in this case, (the governor) believes individuals should have equal protection under the law,” she said.