

Illinois bishops say new civil union law could harm religious freedom

CHICAGO - Illinois' new law legalizing civil unions and giving them the same status as marriages in the state has the "potential for a serious conflict with religious liberty," according to the state's Catholic bishops.

Gov. Pat Quinn signed the legislation into law Jan. 31 in Chicago, making Illinois the sixth state to permit same-sex marriage. The others are New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa and Vermont. The District of Columbia also has legalized same-sex marriages.

In California, a 2008 state Supreme Court ruling that permitted same-sex unions was overturned by Proposition 8 - approved by more than 7 million voters - which says marriage between a man and a woman is valid in California. It is currently being challenged in court.

Called the Illinois Religious Freedom Protection and Civil Union Act, the legislation is instead likely to "offer little protection in the context of litigation religious institutions may soon encounter in relation to charitable services, adoption and foster care," said a statement from the Illinois Catholic Conference, issued after the Jan. 13 Senate passage of the legislation.

"We hope these issues will be seriously evaluated by policymakers in the coming months and that additional conscience protections will be afforded," it added.

The statement from the conference, which represents the state's Catholic bishops on public policy matters, also outlined the Catholic view on marriage, which it said is "not just any relationship between human beings."

"The church did not invent marriage and neither has any state," the bishops said. "No ideology can erase from the human spirit the certainty that marriage exists solely between a man and a woman, who by personal gift, proper and exclusive to themselves, mutually commit to each other in order to cooperate with God in the procreation and upbringing of new human lives."

Bishop Thomas J. Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., also issued a separate statement late last year taking issue with a quote attributed to Quinn that “my religious faith animates me to support” the bill legalizing civil unions.

“He did not say what religious faith that would be, but it is certainly not the Catholic faith,” Bishop Paprocki said.

“If the governor wishes to pursue a secular agenda for political purposes, that is his prerogative for which he is accountable to the voters,” he added. “But if he wishes to speak as a Catholic, then he is accountable to Catholic authority, and the Catholic Church does not support civil unions or other measures that are contrary to the natural moral law.”

As he signed the law, Quinn said it was “an important day in the history of our state because today we are showing the world that the people of Illinois believe in equality for all.”

The law, which takes effect June 1, allows both heterosexual and same-sex couples to enter into civil unions and specifically grants them legal rights in relation to hospital visitation and emergency medical decision-making, the ability to share a room in a nursing home, adoption and parental rights, pension benefits and inheritances.