

Illinois Catholic Conference urges rejection of civil union legislation

CHICAGO – The Catholic Conference of Illinois has urged the state's General Assembly to reject a Senate bill legalizing civil unions for same-sex couples.

"Everyone has a right to marry, but no one has the right to change the nature of marriage. Marriage is what it is and always has been, no matter what a legislature decides to do," said Chicago Cardinal Francis E. George in remarks accompanying a Nov. 22 statement issued by the conference on behalf of the cardinal and the other bishops of Illinois.

The conference is the public policy arm of the bishops.

"The public understanding of marriage will be negatively affected by the passage of a bill that ignores the natural fact that sexual complementarity is at the core of marriage," said the cardinal. "Moreover, the impact of this legislation on the church's social service ministries remains an important and thus far unanswered concern."

He criticized the fact that such an important measure was being considered by a lame-duck General Assembly. "More should be done to engage the people in public debate" on it, he said.

The body of lawmakers was scheduled to consider the measure Nov. 30.

The legislation would provide spousal rights to same-sex partners in a civil union and grant them legal rights in surrogate decision-making for medical treatment, survivorship, adoptions, and accident and health insurance.

"Marriage was not invented by either the state or the church and neither can change its nature," said the conference statement. "However, laws structure society and they influence patterns of behavior and thought. In our country, as in most others, marriage is granted unique protections and benefits because marriage is the foundation of family and society. The proposed legislation would further weaken an

already fragile institution.”

The statement said there is “an inherent conflict” between the bill and religious liberty and its language doesn’t offer adequate protection for religious institutions and individuals from litigation he predicted they would face if the bill becomes law.

One of the bill’s sponsors, Rep. Greg Harris, a Chicago Democrat, told the Chicago Sun Times Nov. 23 that the legislation would not change the definition of marriage as being between a man and a woman, which currently is spelled out in state law.

A portion of the bill states that the proposal is not intended to “interfere with or regulate the religious practice of any religious body.” It also says religious bodies are “free to choose whether or not to solemnize or officiate (at) a civil union.”

But the Catholic conference statement said that without “explicit protections for religious liberties,” it expected the General Assembly or the courts will soon:

- Require faith-based institutions that provide adoption or foster care services “to place adoptive or foster children with couples who have entered into a same-sex civil union.”
- Compel Catholic parishes or agencies that provide social services (including retreats, religious camps, homeless shelters, senior care centers and community centers) to make those services available to individuals in same-sex civil unions.
- Refuse “to protect small employers who do not wish to extend family benefits to employees in a same-sex civil union.”

Providing “marriagelike benefits in civil union legislation” will only “intensify the legal attack on marriage,” the statement said.

It pointed out that if the bill becomes law, there “are literally hundreds of references to married ‘spouses’ throughout Illinois’ law to which parties to a civil union will now be included.”

The statement reiterated that the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that homosexuals “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.”

“Accordingly, we stand ready to work with the legislature and other agencies of state government to prevent unjust discrimination and to provide benefits to people judged by the civic authority as deserving – as long as such provision does not include the attempted redefinition of marriage as a union between one man and one woman for the sake of family,” the statement said.