

Maryland lawmakers must not redefine marriage

This week, members of the Maryland State Senate are expected to debate Senate Bill 116, a bill that would legalize same-sex marriage in the state. A vote on the measure is expected soon. The Maryland Catholic Conference is urging citizens to contact their senators now and oppose any efforts to redefine marriage.

As the week began, Catholics from across the state braved cold weather and the threat of snow to gather together in Annapolis for the annual Lobby Night sponsored by the Maryland Catholic Conference. As good citizens, they met directly with their legislators about a host of issues, including to voice their opposition to redefining marriage, their support for programs that lift people out of poverty and help immigrants build new lives for themselves and their families, their opposition to the death penalty, their support for the proposed BOAST tax credit that would benefit families sending children to Catholic schools in the state, their support for centers that assist women facing crisis pregnancies, and their opposition to the state's lack of regulation for abortion clinics.

That kind of faithful citizenship, advocating for the common good as good citizens, was assailed this past week during committee hearings on the same-sex marriage bill. Those opposing efforts to redefine marriage were wrongly called bigots and homophobes and were accused of trying to impose their religious beliefs on others and of opposing civil rights and equality for homosexuals.

The distortions actually began with the name of the legislation itself: the "Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act." The initial legislation included no genuine religious freedom protections, and the committee only added limited religious exemption amendments.

In its opposition to this Maryland Senate bill that claims to protect marriage but would actually undermine it, the Maryland Catholic Conference has noted, "Our focus as a society should be on strengthening marriage, not dismantling it altogether, especially when the harmful effects of the erosion of marriage are so

apparent.”

If it redefines marriage, the Maryland legislature would join a handful of state legislative bodies that have attempted to change the definition of marriage that has served as the foundation of civilization for thousands of years. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ website on marriage notes: “Marriage is much bigger than a mere private relationship between individuals. Marriage and family constitute the cornerstone of neighborhoods, communities, churches, towns, cities, societies, nations and the world. The marriage of one man and one woman is a fundamental pattern of and for human existence, serving the public good.”

Noting the complementary gifts that mothers and fathers bring to marriage and to raising children, the Archdiocese of Washington’s website makes the point that, “The church opposes any redefinition of marriage because it is contrary to natural law and God’s design. Marriage is the foundation of the family and is the best environment to welcome and raise children. Healthy marriages and families are essential for society to flourish.”

That point has been emphasized by the Maryland Catholic Conference, which has noted, “The union of one man and one woman is the only human relationship capable of creating children and nurturing them together as father and mother.”

In his travels around the world, Pope Benedict has often spoken of marriage between a man and a woman as a sanctuary of life and love, noting that it has been the foundation “of the great cultures of the world. And if this disappears, the root of our culture will be destroyed.”

Much like the abortion rights movement has distorted the meaning of the words “choice” and “freedom,” the advocates of redefining marriage have wrapped their effort in the guise of equality and civil rights, and in the process have misused those terms and ignored the context and reality of marriage.

The Catholic Church recognizes the equal human dignity of all people, stands against any injustice, and historically has supported the struggle for civil rights. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ website notes, “Reserving marriage to a man and a woman is not a denial of equality. It’s respecting reality – the reality of

marriage as the union of a man and a woman. Sexual difference is not an arbitrary construct. Men and women matter. Men and women matter in marriage. It's that simple. There are many ways to serve and protect basic rights and the equal dignity of persons, but sacrificing marriage is not one of them."

Proponents of same-sex marriage say that homosexual couples are discriminated against, but already in Maryland law, domestic partners have significant benefits, including health care decision making and facility visitation, state employee health benefits, health and life insurance coverage at the request of the employer, and exemption from state inheritance taxes.

The effort to redefine marriage is relatively new, but the reality of marriage has predated laws, countries and even churches. The Maryland Catholic Conference has also noted, "Our opposition to redefining marriage rests on an understanding of the nature of marriage shared across time, religion, cultures and societies." In a statement after last week's Senate committee vote passing the same-sex marriage bill on to the full Senate, the Maryland Catholic Conference further warned, "Our fundamental concern about redefining marriage is for the sake of our whole society, and particularly for children and their elemental desire to know, and ideally to be raised and loved by their biological father and mother."

Historically, the state of Maryland has recognized the special role that marriage between a man and a woman has in producing children who will become society's next generation. As faithful citizens concerned for the common good in our state, we say, now is the time for Marylanders to oppose redefining marriage, for the good of families and children today and tomorrow.

This editorial also appears in this week's edition of the Catholic Standard, newspaper of the Archdiocese of Washington.