

New Jersey bishops launch state campaign against same-sex marriage

TRENTON, N.J. - In New Jersey, where a vote on same-sex marriage is anticipated soon after the November elections, the state's Catholic bishops are urging local Catholics to help uphold the sanctity of marriage as a bond between a man and a woman.

The bishops outlined the church's teaching on marriage and the importance of maintaining the legal definition of a married couple as a husband and wife in their Aug. 23 pastoral letter, "The Call to Marriage Is Woven Deeply Into the Human Spirit."

The five-page document is the latest in a series of statements by the New Jersey bishops on the same-sex marriage issue.

The letter was released to parishes the weekend of Aug. 22-23 as the official kickoff to the New Jersey Statewide Initiative for Marriage Protection.

The initiative, a joint project of the New Jersey Catholic Conference, the dioceses of New Jersey and the Knights of Columbus, is an attempt to rally Catholics to get behind the prevention of a state law that would expand the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples.

New Jersey already recognizes civil unions for same-sex couples.

The campaign will continue through Oct. 15 and will include a statewide drive for

petitions in support of traditional marriage that will be delivered to state legislators.

According to Patrick Brannigan, executive director of the New Jersey Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the state's bishops, the campaign's launch date was chosen to coincide with the second reading for Sunday, Aug. 23, in which St. Paul in his Letter to the Ephesians describes the bond of marriage between husband and wife.

The bishops stress in their pastoral letter that church teaching has always clearly defined marriage as a union between one man and one woman.

"This great truth about marriage is not some obscure doctrinal fine point but a fact of human nature, recognized from time immemorial by people of virtually every faith and culture," the message states.

"God made us male and female; only men and women cooperating in marital love together can truly become one flesh, and only marital unions further God's purpose of creating new life that is welcomed, loved, nurtured and educated by their mother and father," they wrote.

The bishops drew a distinction between same-sex unions, which have been legalized in New Jersey under the Civil Union Act, and the concept of marriage. In a civil union, same-sex couples are afforded all the same rights, benefits and protections under the law as a married heterosexual couple. But while marriage is regulated by civil law, the bishops explain, it is "a basic human and social institution" that originates from God.

"Therefore, neither the church nor state can alter the basic meaning and structure of marriage," the bishops said.

The bishops urged Catholics to do their part to protect the institution of marriage,

saying they should support those who are preparing to marry, those who choose to remain single and couples who face difficulty in their marriage.

The letter was signed by: Archbishop John J. Myers of Newark; Bishop Joseph A. Galante of Camden; Bishop Paul G. Bootkoski of Metuchen; Bishop Arthur J. Serratelli of Paterson; Bishop John M. Smith of Trenton; and Bishop William C. Skurla of the Byzantine Eparchy of Passaic.