

Same-sex marriage bill introduced in Maryland

House Bill 351, which would change the definition of marriage in Maryland to include same-sex unions, was introduced Jan. 25.

Called the “Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act,” the bill would repeal a provision specifying that the only valid marriage in the state is that of a man and a woman. Instead, a valid marriage would be one between two people not otherwise prohibited from marrying.

The bill also said that an official of a religious institution, such as a priest, would not be forced to perform a marriage ceremony if the marriage is not one the church would recognize.

“It’s the bill that we anticipated,” said Mary Ellen Russell, deputy director for education and family life with the Maryland Catholic Conference, the legislative lobbying arm of Maryland’s Catholic bishops. “I think the likelihood of the bill passing is not high ... having people sponsor a bill and getting a bill passed are two different things.”

She pointed out that only one state – Massachusetts – has legalized same-sex marriage and that the majority of states have moved in the opposite direction, passing constitutional amendments to define marriage as between a man and a woman.

House Bill 351 follows last fall’s decision by the Maryland Court of Appeals to uphold state law defining marriage as a union between one man and one woman. But the Court of Appeals said that the state’s General Assembly could overturn the law and redefine marriage if it chose to do so.

“This is a historic step forward for the state of Maryland and all of its citizens,” said Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign, a group that focuses on gay rights issues. “Right now, loving and committed same-sex couples and their families are denied the more than 1,000 basic legal rights that a marriage license

provides.”

In a homily on Oct. 25, Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien said the sacred institution of marriage was “radically threatened, in my opinion, by the inclinations of some courts of law and not a few legislatures to apply the legal status of marriage to relationships between persons of the same sex. My own opinion in this matter, I think it fair to say, is widely shared by a great many people of faith, no matter their denomination – people who believe that our laws, all our laws, especially those which so directly affect the human person, properly should be rooted ‘in the laws of nature and nature’s God.’”

He added that although the institution of marriage is regulated by civil and church law, it preceded them both.

“It originated from neither but from God,” he said.