

Illinois passes civil unions bill

NCR Staff Catholic News Service | Dec. 3, 2010



Bishop Thomas John Paprocki sings "Jesus Loves You" by Brian Littrell, former lead singer for the Backstreet Boys, during his installation as the ninth bishop of Springfield, Ill., June 22. (CNS/Justin L. Fowler)

SPRINGFIELD, Ill. -- The Illinois House of Representatives and Senate passed landmark civil unions legislation Nov. 30 and Dec. 1 respectively. Gov. Pat Quinn has pledged to sign the bill. If he does, Illinois would become the 11th state to recognize civil unions or marriages between gay and lesbian couples.

The legislation was harshly criticized by the Illinois bishops and their public policy arm, the Illinois Catholic Conference. "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 Chicago Cardinal Francis George.

The bill passed the Senate 32-24 and the House 61-52.

Quinn, who is Catholic, said his faith led him to support the legislation.

This raised the ire of Springfield Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, who issued a statement Dec. 1 saying, "He did not say what religious faith that would be, but it certainly is not the Catholic faith. 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."

The *Chicago Sun-Times* reported that when Quinn was told of the bishop's statement, he shrugged. "I follow my conscience," the paper quoted Quinn as saying. "I think everyone should do that. I think that's the most important thing to do in life, and my conscience is not kicking me in the shins today."

The Catholic Conference of Illinois, which represents the state's bishops on public policy matters, said it regretted passage of a bill legalizing civil unions for same-sex couples.

The legislation provides 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.

The Catholic conference said the measure will "explicitly grant these unions the same status as marriage in state law."

"Marriage is not just any relationship between human beings. Marriage has been established by our Creator in harmony with the nature of man and woman and with its own essential properties and purpose," the conference said in a statement. "The church did not invent marriage and neither has any state.

"No ideology can erase from the human spirit," it continued, "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."

The conference said that besides essentially redefining marriage, the measure also "contains the potential for a serious conflict with religious liberty," and it urged policymakers to take such concerns seriously and work out "additional conscience protections" in the coming months.

While the bill states that nothing in its wording "should interfere with or regulate the religious practice of any religious body," the conference said that its language "may offer little protection in the context of litigation religious institutions may soon encounter in relation to charitable services, adoption and foster care.

In an earlier statement, the conference 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."

During debate on the bill, State Sen. Heather Steans, a Chicago Democrat, told her fellow lawmakers that passing the measure "makes a statement about the justice for which we stand."

But an opponent of the measure, State Sen. Chris Lauzen, a Republican from Aurora, questioned why lawmakers were focusing on civil unions and not spending their time addressing the state's high unemployment, home foreclosures, a big state debt and severe problems with its social services system.

The *Chicago Tribune* quoted Lauzen as saying: "We are the incompetent laughingstock of government mismanagement and misplaced priorities, and our one-party [Democratic] leadership spends our time on homosexual civil unions."

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