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Redefining Catholic charity

by Nicole Sotelo

If a community lost \$7.5 million in state contracts, 58 employees lost their jobs, and 350 children were displaced, one would hope that a charitable organization would offer support. Unfortunately, it is Catholic Charities in Rockford, IL, that has created this dire situation.

Last week, Catholic Charities in Rockford, IL announced they would stop state-funded adoption and foster care services to avoid potentially placing children in homes of same-gender couples. The move came a week in advance of Illinois' new civil union legislation that provides state recognition of same-gender couples.

They are the fourth Catholic Charities affiliate to discontinue its services in response to church pressure and civil legislation over same-gender unions. Catholic Charities in Boston, San Francisco, and Washington, DC have each altered their care over the last five years. This newest closure in Rockford affects 350 children and 58 employees whose jobs will be eliminated.

Catholicism holds a distinguished legacy of charity. We pride ourselves on the venerable charitable organizations that have been built by generations of hard working and generous Catholics: the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the Knights of Columbus, Catholic Relief Services and Catholic Charities to name a few.

Charity is such an esteemed value that Pope Benedict XVI dedicated his first social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, to the topic. However, it was also under Pope Benedict XVI's watch, while he was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, that a 2003 document was issued claiming that legal recognition of same-gender couples "would be the redefinition of marriage" and discouraged placing adopted children in these families.

Penny Wiegert, the Rockford, Ill. diocesan director of communications, echoed similar sentiments when she spoke last week at the press conference that announced the discontinuance of adoption services: "We

simply cannot compromise the spirit that motivates us to deliver quality, professional services to families by letting our state define our religious teachings."

But the state is not redefining religious teaching. The state only affects civil legislation. Catholic Charities is the one that has chosen to react and, in doing so, is redefining the very notion of Catholic charity: from serving those in need, to serving those who pass a litmus test.

Where should we place the limit on our charity? If we turn away same-gender couples, do we also turn away couples using birth control?

Most Catholics would not place boundaries on care. They recognize that same-gender couples provide loving, stable homes for vulnerable children and youth. A Public Religion Research Institute poll in September 2010 showed that 60 percent of U.S. Catholics support allowing gay and lesbian couples to adopt children, seven points higher than the general public.

In cutting off its state-funded adoption and foster care services, Catholics Charities risks redefining charity and becoming known not for service but for self-service; putting polity in front of people.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates www.WomenHealing.com. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.]

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