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RI bishops: No civil unions for Catholics

by Catholic News Service



Bishop Thomas J. Tobin of Providence, R.I., (CNS)

PROVIDENCE, R.I. -- Saying that civil unions "promote an unacceptable lifestyle, undermine the faith of the church on holy matrimony, and cause scandal and confusion," Providence Bishop Thomas J. Tobin reminded Catholics that they may not participate in such ceremonies.

"To do so is a very grave violation of the moral law and, thus, seriously sinful," he said in a statement June 30, the day after passage of legislation that will give same-sex couples who enter into civil unions the same rights and benefits as marriage in Rhode Island.

The state Senate agreed to the bill, which the House had already approved, on a 21-16 vote late June 29 and Gov. Lincoln D. Chafee, an Independent, has said he will sign it. Some proponents of same-sex marriage in the state opposed the bill, however, saying it did not go far enough and allowed overly broad religious exemptions.

Bishop Tobin said he was "deeply disappointed" at the decision to permit civil unions.

"The concept of civil unions is a social experiment that promotes an immoral lifestyle, is a mockery of the institution of marriage as designed by God, undermines the well-being of our families, and poses a threat to religious liberty," he said.

He said the church members should "have respect and love for persons with same-sex attraction" but must remember that "homosexual activity is contrary to the natural law and the will of God and, therefore, is objectively sinful."

"Persons with same-sex attraction are required to live the Christian virtues of chastity and modesty, as all persons are," Bishop Tobin added.

The Rhode Island vote came less than a week after the New York Legislature approved a same-sex marriage bill, which the state's Catholic bishops said would undermine marriage and families.

Bishop Tobin urged Catholics in Rhode Island "to pray for God's patience, mercy and forgiveness in these distressing times."

"Can there be any doubt that Almighty God will, in his own time and way, pass judgment upon our state, its leaders and citizens, for abandoning his commands and embracing public immorality?" he asked.

In a separate statement released July 1, Bishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of Oakland, Calif., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage, affirmed Bishop Tobin's comments and denounced passage of the civil unions bill.

Elevating same-sex relationships to marital status with all of the rights of marriage, even if the new status is not called marriage, "fails justice because now the government is treating as similar two different realities that cannot be considered as analogous or equivalent in any way," Bishop Cordileone said.

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Marriage Equality Rhode Island called the civil unions legislation "fundamentally flawed" and, along with nine other organizations supporting same-sex marriage, urged Chafee to veto it because it allows religiously affiliated organizations -- including hospitals, day care centers, schools or cemeteries -- not to recognize same-sex unions.

"The bill put forth by the Legislature would create onerous and discriminatory hurdles for same-sex couples that no other state has ever put in place," they said. "By allowing individuals and institutions a free-floating license to discriminate against a whole class of people, in defiance of a general law, this bill represents a huge step backward from both Rhode Island's longstanding nondiscrimination commitments and the balance and language embraced in the law throughout the country."

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