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Blessing discrimination

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When I heard about the law proposed in Arizona that would have used "religious freedom" as an excuse to legalize discrimination against LGBT (and potentially others), I was stunned. I applaud Gov. Jan Brewer of Arizona for vetoing the bill.

What appalled me most, however, was the fact that the Arizona Catholic Conference supported the bill! In fact, their website is crowded with legislative updates on the work they did to pass the legislation, and their lament that it was vetoed.

Of course, Arizona is not alone in considering such legislation. Several other states -- Georgia, Missouri, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Kansas -- are flirting, or have flirted, with some legislative version of the same idea. So I was curious to see how the Catholic Conference in each of those states is responding. Some states, like Mississippi, have too few Catholics to have a statewide "conference," so one has to visit the website of the largest city (Jackson, in the case of Mississippi).

I visited all five websites, and only in Kansas did I find a similar focus. Bishops in Georgia, Missouri, Oklahoma, and Jackson, Miss. are concerned about issues like the contraception mandate in Obamacare (usually framed as a religion freedom issue), immigration reform or the death penalty. These appear to be the emphases if websites are an accurate indication.

Just about everyone can understand that specifically religious actions are protected by our concept of religious freedom. Clergy -- for example -- who represent faith traditions that do not approve of same-sex marriage should not be forced to perform them under threat of some legal penalty. Indeed, our same-sex marriage law in Maryland (and other states where this is legal as well) specifically provide for such exceptions.

But to refuse same-sex couples services that everyone expects, and gets, in exchange for a payment is pure and simple discrimination. Those services might include anything from wedding cakes to flower arrangements to service in a restaurant. To refuse such services and call that "religious" anything is to debase that very word. It's nothing more than Jim Crow revisited, and the Catholic Conferences of the states would do well to oppose such discrimination or at least stay out of the fray.

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