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Iowa bishops oppose gay marrige decision

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DAVENPORT, Iowa

Iowa's Catholic bishops vigorously disagreed with the Iowa Supreme Court's unanimous decision April 3 that strikes down state law defining marriage as a union of one man and one woman.

"This decision rejects the wisdom of thousands of years of human history. It implements a novel understanding of marriage, which will grievously harm families and children," the bishops said in a statement prepared by the Iowa Catholic Conference.

The bishops vowed to continue to protect and promote marriage as a union between a man and a woman and asked Catholics and other citizens of Iowa to call for a constitutional amendment on marriage.

With the high court's ruling, Iowa becomes the third state in the nation to recognize marriages for gay and lesbian couples, after Massachusetts and Connecticut.

Last May, California's Supreme Court overturned its statute barring same-sex marriage, but a constitutional amendment to define marriage as between a man and a woman was approved by voters in November. That state's Supreme Court is to issue a decision on a constitutional challenge to the ballot initiative.

In its 7-0 decision, the court in Des Moines ruled that "limiting civil marriage to a union between a man and a woman violates the Iowa Constitution." The decision further allows gay and lesbian couples full access to the institution of civil marriage.

The ruling resolves an action brought by six same-sex couples who were denied marriage licenses in Polk County because of the 1998 Defense of Marriage Act that defined marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

The Polk County District Court ruled the statute unconstitutional Aug. 30, 2007, because it said it denied due process and equal protection under state law. The court ordered the county recorder to begin processing marriage licenses for same-sex couples, but stayed the order pending an appeal by Polk County.

Iowa Supreme Court Justice Mark Cady wrote that "(we) are firmly convinced the exclusion of gay and lesbian people from the institution of civil marriage does not substantially further any important governmental objective."

Iowa Senate Majority Leader Mike Gronstal and Iowa House Speaker Pat Murphy, both Democrats, applauded the court's decision and said that Iowa "continues to be a leader in guaranteeing all of our citizens equal rights."

The national Human Rights Commission said the Iowa Supreme Court "did its job by recognizing that gay and lesbian couples who form committed relationships and loving families deserve the same level of respect afforded to heterosexual couples."

Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, said: "My personal view has been that marriage is between a man and a woman, and I have voted in support of that concept. But I also fundamentally believe that same-sex couples in a civil union should be entitled to all the basic legal protections and benefits of marriage. ... I will respect and support that decision and I hope that other Iowans can do the same."

For VeraBeth Bricker, a Catholic who lives in the Davenport Diocese, the court's decision strikes against everything she believes.

"I really care for gays. They're a good community. But I'm against gay marriage. From the depth of my values I'm against it. (Marriage) is for a man and a woman," she told The Catholic Messenger, Davenport's diocesan newspaper.

Iowa's bishops said they "uphold the right of all people to be treated with respect and live in peace. This right, like the right to enter into a permanent, monogamous marriage of one man and one woman, derives directly from the intrinsic dignity of the human person."

Signing the statement were Archbishop Jerome G. Hanus of Dubuque and Bishops R. Walker Nickless of Sioux City, Martin J. Amos of Davenport and Richard E. Pates of Des Moines.

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