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Bishops: Same-sex marriage 'not in the public interest'

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Supporters of traditional marriage demonstrate in Annapolis, Md., prior to a March 11 debate in the Maryland House of Delegates. (CNS photo/George P. Matysek Jr., Catholic Review)

SEATTLE -- Legislation introduced by lawmakers in Washington state that would redefine marriage to allow same-sex marriage "is not in the public interest," said the bishops of the state's three Catholic dioceses.

"Marriage in faith and societal traditions is acknowledged as the foundation of civilization. It has long been recognized that the stability of society depends on the stability of family life in which a man and a woman conceive and nurture new life," the bishops said in a statement released Jan. 13.

"In this way, civil recognition of marriage has sought to bestow on countless generations of children the incomparable benefit of a loving mother and father committed to one another in a lifelong union," they said.

The current state law says that "marriage is a civil contract between a male and a female," the bishops noted. "This same law also prohibits marriage to close-blood relations, a clear indication that the definition of marriage is related to bringing children into the world and the continuation of the human race."

The bishops called on all citizens of Washington to support the current legal definition of marriage and contact their state senator and representatives to urge them to "defend the current legal definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman."

At the same time, the bishops asked everyone to join them in praying "for married couples and families and to do everything possible to support them."

The statement was signed by: Archbishop J. Peter Sartain and Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo of Seattle; Bishop Blase J. Cupich of Spokane; and Bishop Joseph J. Tyson of Yakima. It was released by the Washington State Catholic Conference in Seattle, the public policy arm of the state's bishops.

On Jan. 10 in her State of the State address, Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire announced her support for legalizing same-sex marriage. Three days later, 23 senators -- 21 Democrats and two Republicans -- introduced legislation that would make Washington the seventh state where same-sex couples are allowed to marry.

Gregoire told The New York Times in an interview that as not only a governor but as a lawyer, a wife, a mother and a Catholic, she has "struggled with this issue for the last seven years." She described her position on the issue as having evolved, in part because of conversations she said she has had on the topic with her daughters, who have "grown up with kids who've got two moms and two dads."

In their statement, the bishops said that "by defining marriage both in terms of the relationship between a man and a woman and its important role of guaranteeing the succession of generations, the state is recognizing the irreplaceable contribution that married couples make to society."

Changing the law "would mean that the state would no longer recognize the unique sacrifices and contributions made by these couples, thereby adding to the forces already undermining family life today."

Upholding the traditional definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman "does not depend on anyone's religious beliefs," they said. "Washington state's present law defining marriage as 'a civil contract between a male and a female' is grounded not in faith, but in reason and the experience of society."

The law now recognizes "the unique and irreplaceable potential of a man and woman to conceive and nurture new life, thus contributing to the continuation of the human race," they said.

"Married couples who bring children into the world make particular sacrifices and take on unique risks and obligations for the good of society," the statement said. "For this reason the state has long understood that it has a compelling interest in recognizing and supporting these mothers and fathers through a distinct category of laws."

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