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Public policy arm of the Church in Illinois creates new initiative to defend attacks on marriage

Passage and enactment of the state's new civil unions law has prompted Illinois' bishops to create a Defense of Marriage department within the Catholic Conference of Illinois.

CCI's Director of Government Relations Zach Wichmann heads the new department, with each diocese appointing advocates who seek to promote the Church's love and solicitude toward marriage, families and children, and defend against public policy encroachments. Department appointees include: Laurie Edwards, Diocese of Belleville; Deacon Richard Hudzik, Archdiocese of Chicago; Michael Brummond, Diocese of Joliet; Tim Roder, Diocese of Peoria; Mary O'Grady, Diocese of Rockford; and Carlos Tejada, Diocese of Springfield.

Department members gathered at an organizational meeting in September, and will convene quarterly.

Wichmann said the new department reflects the bishops' intention to keep the Church in the public square and in line with the Catholic faith's mission. The Defense of Marriage department will advocate marriage as the proper home for human sexuality, as it serves as an expression of love and cooperation in God's creative design.

Wichmann acknowledged the new department will be fighting an uphill battle against current societal trends.

"The teachings of the Church are not overwhelmingly popular everywhere, nor are they always easily explained," Wichmann said. "But our message will be proclaimed for the sake of stronger families, secure children and an enriched spiritual life."

He noted the new civil unions law is just the tip of the iceberg of an eroding yet historically cooperative relationship between the Church and the state of Illinois. The recent decision by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services to cancel contracts with Catholic Charities because of the organizations' refusal to place children with cohabitating couples – including those in civil unions – reflects a growing tension between the Church and state. Catholic Charities is suing to retain the contracts, citing religious discrimination and a 40-year partnership with the state to provide loving homes to the neediest of children.

“The government is not obliged to embrace Church teaching,” Wichmann said. “But the insistence that Catholic organizations discard that teaching undermines our mission and severely narrows opportunities for public ministry.”

And the Church does not suffer alone, Wichmann said. The stature of the nuclear family – which provides love, stability and confidence to children, as well as organization to society – diminishes every day.

“The effects are evident in the performance of children in school, in truancy and crime rates, and in an ailing culture that too often values feeling good over self-giving, and individuality over the common good,” Wichmann said.

He warned that initiatives to redefine marriage in Illinois civil law are likely on the horizon. Lawmakers in New York state this summer passed and the governor signed into law a measure legalizing same-sex marriage. The governor of Maryland is expected to push a same-sex marriage proposal next year. Illinois may not be far behind, Wichmann noted.

“The outcomes of these proposals will have implications in many areas of civil and religious life,” Wichmann said. “The Catholic Church will strive to prevent negative consequences to society, public ministry and children.”

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