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Don't alter the definition of marriage

By **ROBERT GILLIGAN**

Redefinition of marriage legislation making its way through the Illinois Legislature is not simply about fairness, as proponents claim. This legislation radically alters the legal definition of and consequently the cultural attitude toward, a key framework of our society.

The Illinois Senate has passed legislation that changes the state law definition of marriage from “between a man and a woman” to “between two persons.”

We ask the Illinois House to pause and think before considering this proposal.

Marriage was created before the state or church existed. Long before Christ walked Earth, a man and a woman joined together to form a union of body, mind and spirit, with the intent and hope of creating children with whom to share their love.

Today, marriage still exists in the majority of cultures around the globe in that form. It also stands as the only institution that ties children to their biological mother and father.

We commend and respect single-parent, adoptive-parent and multigenerational-parent families. Their love for children ties a knot in the fraying fabric of our fast-paced society.

Changing the construction of marriage goes beyond the love of children, however. It blurs our identity as formed by natural

order per God's creation — a creation that acknowledges yet scars beyond modern science.

Redefining marriage will also enshrine in state law a profound change in societal norms that deprecates marriage, with the potential for the state to eventually define marriage as anything it says it is.

We also remain wary about the real-world consequences of altering the definition of marriage.

Senate testimony aside, it is likely that if this legislation becomes law, children will be taught in school about families with two moms, two dads, two moms and one dad, or some other such permutation. We argue that such a discussion is best had at home. And we also wonder about the impact of such a curriculum change on the religious freedom of the teacher forced to teach this new definition of marriage and family.

As for religious freedom, this legislation appears to skip along the tenets of that First Amendment right. It lands firmly in not forcing any pastor or church to solemnize any marriage. But it teeters on the definitions of religious facilities.

Although parish halls or church fellowship halls apparently will not be forced to host a same-sex wedding or reception, health care facilities, educational facilities and social service agencies do not enjoy that same protection. They are not defined by

the legislation as “religious facilities.”

Where does that leave Catholic schools, hospitals, charities and child-welfare entities? You may think we're pushing the envelope, but we're a bit gun-shy. Civil unions were approved two years ago after public promises were made during Senate debate assuring that no faith-based social service organizations would be affected. Six months after civil unions became law, Catholic Charities in Illinois was barred from state contracts for foster care and adoption because of their religious beliefs.

And it's not just the Catholic faith that has concerns. Leaders of more than 1,700 faith communities across the state — including the Anglican Church in North America, The Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and the Roman Catholic Church — signed a letter sent to every Illinois lawmaker, expressing serious trepidation about this legislation.

Again, we ask the Illinois House to stop and consider the consequences of redefining the structure of marriage. Laws teach, and the lesson about marriage should focus on natural order and religious freedom.

Robert Gilligan is executive director of the Catholic Conference of Illinois.

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