

D.C.'s same-sex marriage bill: Finding the right balance

Op-ed by

Most Reverend Donald W. Wuerl

Archbishop of Washington

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One year ago, I stood with city leaders on a hill in Northeast as we broke ground for affordable housing in the District. When the St. Martin's Apartments are completed, nearly 200 low-income families and individuals will get a fresh start on life in a wonderful example of the type of effective public-private partnerships the residents of our nation's capital need.

St. Martin's is being developed by Catholic Charities, on land owned by the Catholic Church and with funding sources that include the District of Columbia.

Catholic Charities and the Archdiocese of Washington are committed to continuing to serve the people of the District as we have for many decades. That includes partnerships such as St. Martin's. Unfortunately, the D.C. Council is considering legislation that could end these kinds of partnerships.

It doesn't need to be that way. While we do not agree with the council on redefining marriage, we recognize that it is firmly committed to opening marriage to homosexual couples. We are asking that new language be developed that more fairly balances different interests — those of the city to redefine marriage and those of faith groups so that they can continue to provide services without compromising their deeply held religious teachings and beliefs. The archdiocese is not alone in this request. Other groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, the InterFaith Conference of Metropolitan Washington and nationally recognized legal scholars all called for stronger protections for religious freedom in their testimony on the bill.

For the archdiocese and Catholic Charities, two core tenets of our faith are at the heart of our concerns: our understanding of the nature of marriage and our commitment to expressing Christ's love through service to others. Under the legislative language before the D.C. Council, the archdiocese would be forced to choose between these two principles. The archdiocese has long made clear that all people have equal dignity, regardless of sexual orientation. But marriage is reserved for husband and wife because of its essential connection with the creation of children.

The proposed legislation offers little protection for religious beliefs, including no protections for individuals, as is required under the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Under the bill, religious organizations would be exempt from participating in ceremonies or from teaching about same-sex marriage in religion classes and retreats in accord with their faith beliefs, but they would be required to recognize and promote same-sex marriage everywhere else, including in employment policies, and adoption and foster-care policies, against their beliefs.

So what does this mean?

The archdiocese and Catholic Charities are committed to continuing to provide services in the District. Despite the headlines, there has been no threat or ultimatum to end services, just a simple recognition that the new requirements by the city for religious organizations to recognize same-sex marriages in their policies could restrict our ability to provide the same level of

services as we do now. This is so because the District requires Catholic Charities to certify its compliance with city laws when applying for contracts and grants. This includes contracts for homeless services, mental health services, foster care and more. Since Catholic Charities cannot comply with city mandates to recognize and promote same-sex marriages, the city would withhold contracts and licenses.

Each year, 68,000 people in the District rely on Catholic Charities for shelter, nutrition, medical and legal care, job training, immigration assistance, and more. This assistance is offered to whoever needs it, regardless of race, religion, gender, nationality or sexual orientation. Many of the programs are offered in partnership with the city, which turns to Catholic Charities and other ministries when it cannot provide social services on its own. Catholic Charities has a proven track record of high-quality service, supported through caring, qualified staff, thousands of dedicated volunteers and millions of dollars in financial support from parishioners all over the region. This legislation won't end Catholic Charities' services, but it would reduce unnecessarily the resources available for outreach.

We recognize that the council is likely to legalize same-sex marriage. It is the hope of the archdiocese and Catholic Charities that council members will work with us to find a way to better balance interests so religious organizations that have served this city well for many decades may continue to provide services without compromising the tenets of their faith.

The writer is archbishop of Washington.