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BISHOPS' STATEMENT

DATE: January 16, 2004

Today we announce a critical stage in our educational efforts in Massachusetts on the issue of marriage. Our efforts and concern are not new. From its beginnings, the Roman Catholic Church has upheld the institution of marriage as the union between a man and a woman. Through this unique bond, families and communities are ordered, nourished, and sustained. The joining of man and woman serves as part of the very foundation of society. Our view is not parochial; it reflects the common sense understanding of marriage that crosses every cultural border. Nor is our view at all a product of prejudice. We wish to strengthen marriage and families, and this motivates our concern about redefining marriage.

Sadly, in recent years, we have witnessed the breakdown of family life in western society due to no-fault divorce and the generalization of the acceptance of cohabitation. The campaign to redefine marriage will only accelerate this negative trend by making the institution indifferent to the absence of either a mother or a father, regardless of the impact on children.

All studies have shown that the best venue for child rearing is a stable, permanent relationship between a man and a woman. Ignoring this data, the Supreme Judicial Court declared in the Goodridge case that marriage will no longer be linked to children and their wellbeing. According to the court, it is the "act of self-definition" of adults in choosing relationships, and "not the begetting [and rearing] of children," that is the new essence of legal marriage in Massachusetts.

A recent report of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University entitled "The State of Our Unions" expressed concern that marriage was becoming less "child-centered" and more "adult-centered" due to a "weakening connection between marriage as a couple relationship and marriage as a parental relationship . . . As a result, there is a growing split between adults' and children's experience of marriage. Though most adults continue to prize marriage and to seek it for themselves, children are less able to count on their parents' marriages as the secure foundation of their family lives." Recasting marriage in "gender-neutral" terms may help make marriage more "adult-centered", but the SJC's decision in Goodridge ratifies a trend that will only harm children.

The Goodridge ruling is the latest in a series of developments that has prompted the Church's active participation in this public policy debate.

Despite the heroic efforts of Bishop Kenneth Angell and other concerned Vermonters, a civil unions bill was enacted in that state in 2000, expanding the definition of spouse to include persons in same-sex relationships. Almost three years ago, the Goodridge lawsuit was filed in our state courts to create same-sex marriage. In response, over 130,000 citizens petitioned the Massachusetts legislature. They asked that a constitutional amendment affirming marriage as the union between a man and a woman be sent to the ballot. We supported that effort and many Catholics helped circulate signature petitions. This exercise in democracy was unjustly blocked by the actions of the then-Senate President, however, and no vote was ever taken.

Last year, legislators introduced a new amendment called the Marriage Affirmation and Protection Amendment. We voiced our support in a statement issued to parishes across the Commonwealth last June. Again in November, after the Supreme Judicial Court handed down its ruling in the Goodridge case, we issued another statement to our parishes. We expressed our profound disappointment and urged people to contact their legislators on behalf of the marriage amendment.

Catholics, along with thousands of other citizens, are upset over what the court did in Goodridge when it redefined marriage. We are told by some legislators, however, that they are not getting a sufficient amount of calls from their constituents in support of the amendment.

Archdiocese of Boston—Dioceses of Fall River, Springfield, Worcester

People may be hesitant to act for fear of being falsely labeled as bigots or intolerant. A full-scale campaign through the media to shame concerned citizens into silence is undoubtedly having an effect. Now supporters of redefining marriage have a radical court decision to use as a means of coercing the public, rather than allowing people to vote on this important issue. These developments have spurred the Catholic Church to expand its efforts in a way that encourages citizens to be more informed and to be involved to an even greater degree in this crucial public debate. This is the constitutional right and democratic duty of every citizen, including Catholics.

The Goodridge ruling and the push for same-sex marriage present both a crisis and a challenge. To meet this challenge, we have committed ourselves to do all we can. We have already visited and will continue to visit parishes throughout our respective dioceses to talk about the marriage issue.

In addition, today we announce a critical stage of our efforts. Almost 1 million copies of an informational mailer will be delivered to Catholics across the Commonwealth in the next several days. This historic endeavor reflects the seriousness with which we take the need for the legislature to give initial approval to the marriage amendment on February 11.

The mailer contains the entire text of a compelling document on the importance of marriage approved by all of the Catholic bishops of the United States last year. The mailer also describes how Catholics can help show their support for traditional marriage in the public arena. Specifically, it calls on Catholics to contact their legislators before February 11. Our message is this: the people should have the right to vote on restoring the definition of marriage as the union between a man and a woman. Legislators should let the people decide by sending the marriage amendment to the voters. We add today—please do not delay the February 11 vote.

We are taking this unprecedented step to speak as shepherds directly to our flocks, and to exercise our responsibility as teachers specific to the ordained ministry of bishop.

Will our efforts inspire more people to talk to their legislators, which in turn may encourage legislators to do the right thing? We hope so. The stakes are too high, and we will have to answer to God for anything we fail to do.

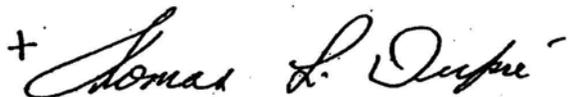
Thus, we urge the faithful to read the mailer and to contact their legislators. As the United States Catholic Bishops stated in the document included in the mailer, “[r]esponsible citizenship is a virtue. Participation in the political process is a moral obligation. This is particularly urgent in light of the need to defend marriage and to oppose the legalization of same-sex unions as marriages.”



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