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Statement on Missouri Constitutional Amendment 1
Government Communications in English Only

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On November 4th voters will consider a proposed amendment to the Missouri Constitution to make English the language of all governmental meetings. The official ballot title for Constitutional Amendment 1 reads as follows:

Shall the Missouri Constitution be amended to add a statement that English shall be the language of all governmental meetings at which any public business is discussed, decided, or public policy is formulated whether conducted in person or by communication equipment including conference calls, video conferences, or Internet chat or message board?

English is already the de facto language of meetings of governmental bodies throughout Missouri and there is no need to make this practice a constitutional requirement. By doing so, Amendment 1 prevents local officials from making common sense exceptions when emergencies or other special occasions arise. Even English grammar has exceptions to the general rules, but Amendment 1 is not nearly as flexible as the language it supposedly seeks to protect.

Amendment 1 applies to **all** public meetings so, for example, public officials could not meet with non-English speakers to discuss planned responses to emergencies such as floods, tornadoes, epidemics or terrorist attacks. The proposal could be interpreted to prohibit emergency public bulletins in languages other than English.

The unspoken fear behind Amendment 1 is that newly arrived immigrants will not learn English and that America will become a country in which people no longer understand each other. That is the same suspicion that greeted our Catholic ancestors - the Germans, Poles, Italians and others who came to America's shores in the 19th and early 20th century. A vicious anti-Catholic nativism arose which sought to bar Catholic immigrants from participation in American life.

Catholics who know their heritage know that the present fears are unfounded. Just as our ancestors learned English, so are today's immigrants learning the language of their adopted country. Just as in the past, adults struggle to learn English, but their children and grandchildren rapidly adopt it. They know that learning English is the path to successful integration into American culture. Newly arrived immigrants are starting new businesses, joining civic organizations and becoming active members of our parishes.

Amendment 1, however, expects instant assimilation by newly arrived immigrants, even the elderly, but this is not realistic. We don't need to close the door in the face of newcomers. Rather we need to find legitimate ways to build bridges of communication and greater human

acceptance. Innate human value and dignity transcends language. We might consider laws which do more to foster and encourage opportunities to learn English.

Our laws should reflect the best of our American ideals. We are known as a warm and generous people who confidently extend a welcoming hand to newcomers. Amendment 1, however, seems to be a prejudicial reaction against even legal immigrants and workers. It rejects a higher calling we have in accord with Christ's command to welcome the stranger as Himself. (Mt. 25: 35). I urge voters to vote "NO" on November 4th.

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