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Knights, Minnesota archbishop endanger church neutrality

Nicole Sotelo | Sep. 30, 2010

COMMENTARY

For the last 128 years, millions of Catholic men have faithfully served the church through the Knights of Columbus' mission to help those in need. But do today's 1.8 million members and their supporters know that their Supreme Knight, Carl Anderson, is endangering their legacy by contributing their hard-earned charitable dollars not to the needy, but to political battles?

In October 2008, the Knights of Columbus and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) announced that they had formed a partnership [1]. The Knights would fund the bishops' anti-marriage equality campaigns and Carl Anderson himself would sit as a consultant to the bishops? ad hoc committee on the same topic.

Since then, the Knights of Columbus have contributed millions of dollars to restrict the freedom to marry in state-based political battles ranging from California to Maine.

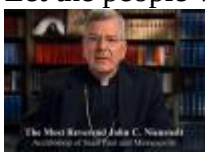
Let me be clear that this was engagement in political battles -- not efforts to simply promote among Catholics the Vatican's teaching on same-gender marriage, a teaching the majority of U.S. Catholics reject [2] as unjust discrimination.

Since the Knights and the bishops made their alliance, the Knights have funneled money through the "National Organization for Marriage" (NOM), a political organization that seeks to deny same-gender couples the civil freedom to marry. Last year alone the Knights contributed $1.4 million of its charitable contributions, not to the needy, but to NOM, as listed in the 2009 Supreme Knight's Annual Report [3].

Then, last week, the Knights ventured into political propaganda even further.

Archbishop John Nienstedt of the St. Paul and Minneapolis archdiocese filmed a DVD video message that was sent to more than 400,000 Catholic households in Minnesota [4]. Nienstedt exhorts Catholics to take political action in order to prevent civil marriage equality.

While the archbishop is careful not to mention the name of the gubernatorial candidate for whom he wishes Catholics would vote, there are a number of indicators that make it appear that this DVD was not merely a faith-based educational video sent to the faithful but rather a politically-influenced campaign tool supported by NOM and the Knights of Columbus:

- On Sept. 19, Catholic News Agency reported [5] that the archdiocese "brought in Maggie Gallagher, head of the National Organization for Marriage, to discuss strategies for opposing the redefinition of marriage." Later, the article explained why: "The issue is relevant to the governor's race in Minnesota. Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party candidate Mark Dayton supports same-sex 'marriage,' while Republican candidate Tom Emmer does not."
- On Sept. 22, NOM's public relations firm issued a press release announcing it had launched a television ad supporting Republican gubernatorial candidate Tom Emmer. Their release reads: ?Thirty-one other states have exercised their constitutional right to vote on marriage?. Mark Dayton and Tom Horner [the Independence Party candidate for governor] do not want the people of Minnesota to have any say."
- The release has remarkably similar wording to the DVD mailed to Catholic households the same week. In the video Nienstedt says: "Thirty-one states have passed marriage amendments and it is time for Minnesotans to have their say." While Nienstedt takes care to not mention the political candidates, his sentence closely resembles that of the press release for NOM's candidate.
- The next line from the archbishop in the DVD is: "A question as important as the future of this great social institution should not be decided by a ruling elite, but by the people of Minnesota themselves?. Let the people speak!"
- A television ad supporting Emmer that NOM aired the same week [6], titled 'Most Important Civil Right,' includes this line: "Shouldn't something this important be decided by Minnesota voters, not politicians?.... Let the people vote!"

- As Nienstedt speaks the lines that mirror those provided by NOM in other settings, sitting over the archbishop?s shoulder in the camera's frame is a strategically-placed Knights of Columbus hat (see photos in this column).

While the archbishop does not explicitly call on Catholics to vote for Republican candidate Tom Emmer, he does not have to do so. Any Catholic Minnesotan who watches the archbishop's DVD and the candidate's television ad -- both issued in the same week -- receives a one-two punch and knows exactly who the archbishop is championing.

The archbishop may not have explicitly crossed over the IRS tax-exempt line, but -- with NOM's help -- he is walking the tightrope. By associating so closely with a political organization, he runs the risk of endangering the charitable status of the archdiocese and -- with that -- the hard-earned money with which the Catholic faithful of the diocese have entrusted him.

Similarly, Carl Anderson who leads the Knights of Columbus is risking something perhaps even more hallow: the legacy of the Knights of Columbus. Knights work year-round to raise money for the needy and promote service in the church. "Charity" is the first of their four core principles [7]. I imagine the majority of Knights never imagined that their Supreme Knight would take the money meant for charity and contribute millions of dollars not to the poor, but to political battles.

Pope John Paul II referred to the Knights of Columbus as "the strong right arm of the Catholic Church." I can only hope that the Knights do not let Carl Anderson change their mission from knights who serve the church to knights who serve the political right.

[Nicole Sotelo is the author of *Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace*, published by Paulist Press, and coordinates **www.WomenHealing.com** [8]. A graduate of Harvard Divinity School, she currently works at Call To Action.

Call to Action recently joined with New Ways Ministry, DignityUSA and Fortunate Families to form "Equally Blessed," a coalition of Catholics that supports the full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people both in the church and in civil society.]

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