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Maryland Catholics celebrate passage of same-sex marriage referendum

Nicole Soojung Callahan | Nov. 7, 2012
Baltimore

Ryan Sattler woke up Wednesday with a smile on his face.

Sattler, 68, of Baltimore, spent months working to pass Question 6, Maryland's referendum on same-sex marriage, focusing his efforts on his fellow Catholics and "trying to touch people's hearts and convince them to support equality."

On Tuesday morning, he and his wife, Joan, were at their local polling place by 6:15 a.m. Proudly wearing their "Catholics for Marriage Equality" T-shirts, they spent Election Day handing out information and talking with voters about Question 6.

"Most people we talked to already had their minds made up, but we did have a few good conversations with undecided voters," Sattler said. "Most of them asked about the law's protections for churches and other religious organizations. I hope we were able to address some of their concerns."

While Maryland's 10 electoral votes went to President Barack Obama as expected, the fate of Question 6 kept Ryan and Joan awake until 2:30 in the morning.

Opponents of same-sex marriage had closed a 10-point polling gap in the final weeks of the campaign, and the Sattlers knew the vote would be close.

In the end, Maryland voters voted 51.9 percent to 48.1 percent to uphold the Civil Marriage Protection Act of 2012, making Maryland among the first states in the nation, with Maine and Washington state, to achieve marriage equality by popular vote.

Previously, voters in 32 states had voted against legalizing same-sex marriage.

The moment in Maryland brought tears to Sattler's eyes.

"On Election Day, Maryland voters chose justice," he said. "They chose equality. They chose love."

For Question 6's opponents, the narrow decision was a disappointment.

Baltimore Archbishop William E. Lori, one of the most outspoken leaders against Question 6, told his diocesan newspaper that the vote "will prove not to have been for the common good of our state."

"We will continue to witness to the values of marriage as understood as the union of one man and one woman, as the most sound, secure and loving way to bring children into the world,? he said.

Lori also called the measure's passage a "wake up call" for Catholics, the *Catholic Review* reported, and represented a need to "redouble our efforts to defend marriage ... and to help people understand it as a unique relationship that does not discriminate against anyone, but is for the good of children and for the good of our society."

For others, the vote brought to mind loved ones.

The Sattlers thought of lesbian and gay couples they know who plan to marry now that they can do so legally. And both thought of Ryan's sister, Mary, a lesbian who committed suicide [1] five years ago after a long struggle with depression brought on in part, Ryan said, by her belief that others could not accept her "for who she was."

"I thought of how Mary might have felt if she could have seen it -- I believe it would have made such a difference to her," Joan Sattler said. "It made it even more meaningful for us, knowing how she struggled, to see marriage equality happen in our state."

Maryland's Catholic governor, Martin O'Malley, sent out an email Wednesday congratulating the diverse coalition that worked to uphold the law. O'Malley signed the Civil Marriage Protection Act on March 1.

"Marylanders joined together to affirm that for a free and diverse people of many faiths -- a people committed to religious freedom -- the way forward is always found through greater respect for the equal rights and human dignity of all," he wrote.

Karin Quimby, deputy faith director of Marylanders for Marriage Equality, called the passage of same-sex marriage in three states -- and the voters' rejection of a same-sex marriage ban in Minnesota -- "a real tipping point" in the pursuit of equality.

"I think the work of Catholics on Question 6 here in Maryland shows that the social justice teaching in the Catholic church is alive and well," she said. "Lay leaders did a great job at the grassroots level, making their voices heard, and their fellow Catholics responded. Catholics clearly believe, very strongly, that every person has dignity, every person should be treated fairly, and every person deserves the same rights."

Even as supporters of same-sex marriage celebrated their victory, they emphasized that much work remains.

"The church needs to be a place of reconciliation and healing as we move forward," Ryan Sattler said. "It's up to us to make sure that our church and our parishes provide a welcoming, spiritually nourishing place for LGBT individuals and families. It's up to us to welcome and include everyone as Jesus did, and speak out -- as Marylanders did yesterday -- for justice and nondiscrimination."

Quimby said the discussion about LGBT rights must and will continue in Maryland, Maine, Washington and Minnesota.

"Marriage equality won by narrow margins -- but we believe those margins will grow as more and more people realize that gays and lesbians want the same things for their families that everybody else wants, and that they deserve them," she said. "As gay and lesbian couples marry throughout Maryland starting on Jan. 1, that will provide a continuing opportunity for this dialogue about equal rights."

Ryan and Joan said they spent most of the day at the polls with other volunteers from Catholics for Marriage Equality. Toward the end of the evening, younger Catholics from their parish, volunteers in their 20s and 30s, came to take the last shift. Although the outcome of Question 6 was still unknown, their presence gave Ryan

Sattler hope.

"I was proud to go home and leave the issue in the hands of the younger members of our faith community, knowing that they were going to carry the torch," he said. "We older folks will be taking the lead from them as we all move forward together."

[Nicole Soojung Callahan lives outside of Washington, D.C.]

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