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In Maine, same-sex marriage is a Catholic issue

by Chuck Colbert



Anne Underwood of Catholics for Marriage Equality joined two dozen clergy speaking out for same-sex marriage at a news conference in Portland, Maine. (photo by Chuck Colbert)

Commentary

Several hundred Catholics in Maine have publicly declared themselves supporters of same-sex marriage, in direct opposition to their bishop, Richard J. Malone of Portland, who they say has gone overboard with a no-holds-barred campaign to roll back same-sex marriage in the Pine Tree State.

Maine voters are to decide Nov. 3 whether to keep or reject a bill extending civil marriage to gay and lesbian couples that the state legislature passed and the governor signed in May.

"Question One," on the ballot reads, "Do you want to reject the new law that lets same-sex couples marry and allows individuals and religious groups to refuse to perform these marriages?"

If passed, it would be the first time -- in more than two dozen tries -- that same-sex marriage would be approved by a majority vote of the people.

Stakes are high. Advocates for marriage equality, still smarting from a referendum last year in California that repealed same-sex marriages in that state, have marshaled forces in the state. Groups opposed to gay

marriage hope that victories in California and Maine will give the cause momentum nationally.

Catholics have taken prominent roles in the campaigns on both sides of the issue.

Expressing a sense of urgency, more than 140 of the state's high-profile business, legal, and civil leaders have placed newspaper ads, giving voice to a Catholic case for same-sex civil marriage.

"We are Catholics who are concerned that the current political campaign to repeal Maine's civil marriage equality law is at odds with fundamental principles of truth and charity, and with vital American traditions of separation of church and state," they write in an extraordinary eight-paragraph statement (Click to see a pdf file), which ran as a paid advertisement in Maine's leading daily newspapers the two Sundays before the vote.

"We believe that the church has a right and often the responsibility to speak out on moral and social issues, to present its views, to seek to educate its member and others," the signatories say, continuing, "But we also believe that the church should continue to recognize that Catholics are free, indeed obligated to follow their own informed consciences on such issues."

More than 500 Catholics signed a declaration of support for same-sex marriage being circulated by the Portland-based Catholics for Marriage Equality, the group announced Oct. 28.

However, Bishop Malone is a primary leader in a highly visible and vocal campaign to stop any reformulation of civil marriage to include of same-sex couples.

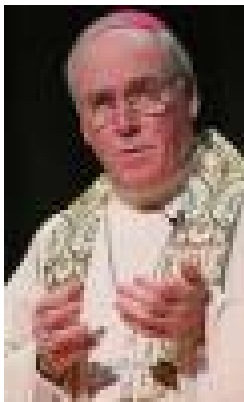
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Besides spearheading a parish-based petition signature drive, assisted by local and national socially conservative groups, Malone also padded church bulletins with anti-gay marriage messages ? on six consecutive Sundays. He required that pastors throughout the diocese preach on traditional marriage.



Malone has produced a DVD, in which he stars, explaining why marriage matters, and

directed that it be shown in all parishes. (See **Marriage: What the church teaches.**)

Last month, Malone called for a second collection to be taken up during Sunday Masses, with proceeds going to **Stand for Marriage**, the organization leading the repeal effort.

The second collection netted \$86,000. In total, the Portland diocese has given \$550,000 to the effort to repeal the same-sex marriage legislation. The Catholic fraternal organization, the Knights of Columbus, has given another \$50,000 to the cause.

While the church's view of sacramental marriage ? with its sacred rites ? is one thing, civil marriage, which is a basic human and civil right, is quite another. Lay Catholics are well aware of these nuances in their advocacy for pro marriage-equality.

The bishop has missed the point.

Particularly irksome for some Maine Catholics -- estimated at 15 to 16 percent of the population ? is Malone's insistence "that it is the doctrine of the Catholic church -- not my personal opinion ? that all Catholics are obligated to oppose legal recognition of same-sex marriage." He said that in a September pastoral letter, quoting Pope Benedict XVI.

"Where does that come from?" asked William H. Slavick of Portland, a retired college professor. "It's my duty to follow my informed conscience" and respecting "pluralistic considerations in the United States."

Slavick, a long-time coordinator of the Pax Christi Maine chapter, favors keeping the civil marriage law, saying that the church is wrong to try to impose a Catholic view of marriage on society.

Sharing those sentiments is attorney Anne Underwood of Topsham, Maine, co-founder of a new grass-roots organization. "Our organization ? **Catholics for Marriage Equality** ? agrees 100 percent with the [bishop and the] church's theological teaching on marriage as a sacrament," she told *NCR*.

But Underwood takes strong exception to Malone's "political opinion" on civil marriage. "We urge Catholics to vote no on question one," she said. After all, "God is love."

Catholics for Marriage Equality is speaking out publicly to raise awareness and is asking Catholics to increase their visibility in opposing the referendum. The group provides bumper stickers and buttons to those who want them. Underwood urges Catholics to wear something red to Mass, as a sartorial sign of support for the cause.



Jack Dougherty wears his Catholics for Marriage Equality button each Sunday. "I am a person who thinks the law is correct and the bishop is wrong," he said. Dougherty of Eliot, 72, is a parishioner at St. Raphael Parish.

"I think there's a clear distinction between the Catholic church's requirements for marriage and the state and its requirements," said Bob McAteer of Ellsworth who believes the current law should stand.

Church funds going to the referendum campaign has angered "No on 1" Catholics.

"I am apoplectic," said Karen Saum of Belfast, who identifies as a lesbian. "I am appalled at the bishop."

"I am furious that my church is spending money to oppose legislation," said David Meuse of Portland, a widower and father of two. "I cannot believe it -- it's infuriating that our money is being spent that way,"

he said. That money should be used to "feed a family or clothe somebody."

Only a few more days are left for the battle over same-sex marriage. It will be played out in television ads, door-to-door canvassing, yard signs, buttons, and bumper stickers. Money and volunteers on both sides of the question continue to pour into the state.

The group "No on 1," or Protect Maine Equality, said in its campaign finance report to the state, filed at the end of last week, that it has raised \$4 million, according to the Associated Press. That figure overshadows the \$2.5 million raised by Stand for Marriage Maine, which forced the referendum through a petition drive.

In addition, the Princeton, N.J.-based National Organization for Marriage has donated \$1.5 million to repealing the same-sex marriage law, according to the Portland Press Herald.

Public opinion polling indicates a tight race. The most recent public opinion poll, released Oct. 26, showed marriage equality backers with a slight lead: 53 percent of those surveyed support same-sex marriage and 42 percent oppose it. For this poll, the Pan Atlantic SMS Group of Portland interviewed 400 Maine residents between Oct. 20 and Oct. 22. It has a margin of error of 5 percent.

A poll released last week by Public Policy Polling of North Carolina showed a 48 percent to 48 percent tie on the same-sex marriage bill. That survey polled 1,130 likely voters.

It is safe to say this one is too close to call.

Perhaps it is now clearer why several hundred Catholics have taken their bishop to task in such a public manner. As the signatories have so eloquently stated, "The current political campaign to repeal Maine's civil marriage equality law is at odds with fundamental principles of truth and charity."

Such clarity -- the voice of these faithful, resounding a profoundly simple yet painfully embarrassing Catholic truth.

[A frequent contributor to NCR, Chuck Colbert freelance journalist from Cambridge, Mass.]

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