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Catholics, Mormons defend religious freedom together

by Catholic News Service



Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago receives applause following his address at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, Feb. 23. (CNS)

PROVO, Utah -- Catholics and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints must continue to stand together as a "vital bulwark" against those in American society who want to "reduce religion to a purely private reality," the president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops told a historic gathering at Brigham Young University in Provo.

Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago spoke Feb. 23 on "Catholics and Latter-day Saints: Partners in the Defense of Religious Freedom" as part of the Mormon school's forum series. He was the first cardinal to speak at the university.

Cardinal George praised the Mormons for their work with Catholics to protect the conscience rights of health care providers and institutions that do not want to participate in abortion or assisted suicide and to defend marriage as the union of a man and a woman.

"When the government fails to protect the consciences of its citizens, it falls to religious bodies to defend

them," he said.

True religious freedom means not just freedom to worship or "individual conscience rights as long as you don't make anyone unhappy," but the right to "influence the public square," he added.

The cardinal said Catholics and Mormons shared not only a common understanding of religious freedom, but the common experience of growing from a small, sometimes persecuted religious minority to larger communities of 67 million U.S. Catholics and about 6 million U.S. Mormons today.

"Both our communities have prospered in a nation that respects religious freedom and recognizes that government should never stand between its citizens and almighty God," he said.

Catholics and Mormons also have stood side by side in efforts against "the degradations associated with pornography" and in promoting "respect for the lives of those waiting to be born and respect for marriage," he added.

Although he did not refer directly to the successful 2008 campaign to overturn same-sex marriage in California, in which Catholics and Mormons were prominent, Cardinal George said both religious communities believe that "every single person is made in God's image and must be respected."

"But that does not mean you accept everything they do," he said. "The relationship is at question here, not the persons."

He also said that those who "have gay people in their families, as I do ... have to be there for them and love them."



The audience at the 22,700-seat Marriott Center gave Cardinal

George a standing ovation after his talk, which also was attended by two top officials of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints -- Elders Quentin L. Cook and M. Russell Ballard of the Quorum of the Twelve.

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Cardinal George told the gathering that his own experiences with the church began when he went to Salt Lake City as a child with his mother, a church organist, who wanted to hear the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

Many years later in 2007, he was offered an opportunity to serve as guest conductor for the Mormon Tabernacle Choir for one song. "Never had I been asked to do something like that," he said. "It was a tremendous feeling of awe and power and great satisfaction."

It was also "something of an ego trip" to have "that great choir waiting for me," Cardinal George said. And when he moved his arm, the choir erupted into "a magnificent sound -- all in unison, all in harmony," he added.

"I thought to myself, 'I'm doing better with the Mormons than I am with the Catholics,'" the cardinal said with a laugh. "I've had a lot harder time getting [Catholics] to sing together."

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