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Minn. pastor challenges Nienstedt's DVD campaign

by Tom Roberts



Supporters of gay marriage rally outside the federal courthouse in San Francisco Jan. 11. (CNS/Reuters)

A Minnesota pastor, in a letter to the editor of a major newspaper, has sharply criticized the campaign against same-sex marriage spearheaded by his archbishop, John C. Nienstedt, of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Fr. Michael Tegeder, 62, pastor of St. Edward Parish, Bloomington, took issue with the content of a 18-minute DVD sent by Minnesota bishops to more than 400,000 Catholics throughout the state. "The premise of the DVD," wrote Tegeder, in a letter published Oct. 2 by the *Star-Tribune*, "is that same-sex couples and their committed relationships are a grave threat to marriage."

The real threat to marriage, the pastor argued, is poverty, citing an earlier report on the effects of the economic downturn on marriage.

"In every serious study, poverty is the top reason for marital breakdowns," wrote Tegeder. "It is very hard to make the case that a small percentage of the population who bond with members of their own sex and seek to live in a committed relationship with members of their own sex could have anything but a positive

effect on the general population's appreciation of stable, faithful, life-giving unions."

The DVD promotes a state constitutional amendment that would limit marriage to one man and one woman. Tegeder said the amendment "does not allow even for civil unions, and it would limit current rights for gay and lesbian citizens. We as Catholics can have our own beliefs about marriage. But we must recognize that people of other faiths and of no faith have conscientious beliefs as well."

The DVDs were mailed out in late September and contain a six minute address by Nienstedt and a 12-minute presentation produced by the Knights of Columbus. According to a report in the *Start Tribune*, Dennis McGrath, spokesman for the archdiocese, said the bishops "felt the situation had gotten to the point that they had to do something. They couldn't stand by and let this thing go any further. The same-sex marriage train was chugging along." McGrath also said the mailing was paid for with a private donation. Nienstedt has described the DVD as a "teaching tool" for voters in advance of the November gubernatorial election. Two candidates running support same-sex marriage and one doesn't.

Tegeder's letter is the latest example of push back against the DVD effort by Catholics. Lucinda Naylor, artist in residence at the Basilica of St. Mary for the past 15 years, was recently suspended from that position when she went public with her opposition to the church campaign. She has asked other Catholics opposed to the effort to send the DVDs to her for an art project. She told the Minnesota Independent that she was thinking of doing something related to water or flames, "since both are important Catholics symbols of the Holy Spirit."

She'll receive help from another group, ReturnTheDVD.org, formed recently by a group of Catholics opposed to the initiative.

In his letter, Tegeder said it was "most scandalous" that Nienstedt "comprised his office with the use of anonymous money." He said the campaign leaves the impression "that political funding is at work here."

He also cited comments last spring, reported in the German press and in the British Catholic publication *The Tablet*, by Austrian Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, who told an interviewer that the church "should give more consideration to the quality of homosexual relationships. A stable relationship is certainly better than if someone chooses to be promiscuous." *The Tablet* also reported that the cardinal said lasting gay relationships deserve respect.

Schönborn, as Tegeder noted, is a close friend of Pope Benedict XVI and a principal author of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

In an interview Oct. 4 with *NCR*, Tegeder said he had received overwhelmingly positive response to his letter, but had not yet received any reaction from Nienstedt.

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Asked if he feared reprisal, he to Paul's instruction to Timothy to be "strong, loving and wise." While being strong "in our convictions, including our conviction about marriage," said Tegeder, "we also have to be wise and loving." It is those last two qualities, he said, that he finds "so missing in this DVD campaign."

He recalled the theme of a recent sermon he'd given on the rich man and Lazarus. The names of the rich and famous are easily known today, he said, "but Jesus turns that around in this story. It's the rich man

who doesn't have a name." In the story, Tegeder said, Jesus also wants to expand the idea of brother. What struck him in the DVD campaign, he said, "is that there were no names in it. It's all ideology, all a theoretical viewpoint."

He couldn't help thinking, he said, of the two gay men in a long, committed relationship, who have adopted two boys "out of a hell hole of a Russian orphanage" and recently spent thousands to help one of their sons overcome a learning disability." One's view of the issue, he said, changes profoundly when you get to know people's names and their circumstances.

"In this very difficult world where there are many divisive issues, we've got to begin getting to know each others' names. We're all up in arms about something that is about love, about people trying to find some happiness in this very difficult world. I've been to the mountain. I laughed when he sent that letter threatening excommunication and interdict," Tegeder said.

"If he throws me out I can walk away from this with my head up ? I love ministry. I wake up at 5 every day and stay busy until midnight. I love it. I'm energized by the opportunities." But some things just need to be said, he remarked.

"This man is leading us in the wrong direction," on this issue, he said of Nienstedt. "We have to call it for what it is ? it's bullying behavior. It's not the work of Jesus Christ. It's not the work of Jesus Christ."

On the matter of obedience, he quoted from a book that he's reading by Msgr. Dennis Murphy, *A View from the Trenches: Ups and Downs of Today's Parish Priest*: "One dimension of this obedience that has become clearer in recent years is that there is more to this promise than a pledge or a commitment made only to a bishop. It encompasses obedience commitment to the church, and especially to the church understood as the people of the diocese within which the priest serves."

"That says it all," said Tegeder.

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