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California priest: 'bishops wrong on same-sex marriage ban'

by Chuck Colbert



FRESNO, Calif.

In his Sunday homily Oct. 6, Fr. Geoffrey Farrow, a diocesan priest, criticized church leadership for supporting Proposition 8, a state ballot measure that would make it unconstitutional for same-sex couples to marry.

In directing the faithful to vote 'Yes' on Proposition 8, the California bishops are not only entering the political arena, they are ignoring the advances and insights of neurology, psychology, and the very statements by the church itself that homosexuality is [an] innate [orientation], Farrow told the congregation at the St. Paul Newman Center at the University of California in Fresno.

In May, the California Supreme Court ruled that a state law defining marriage as between a man and a woman is unconstitutional and that same-sex couples have the right to designate their unions as marriages.

The California bishops called the ruling a 'radical change in public policy' that 'discounts the biological and organic reality of marriage.' They climbed aboard a movement to reverse the ruling by getting Proposition 8 onto the state ballot in November. And they encouraged 'Catholics to provide both the

financial support and the volunteer efforts needed for the passage of? Proposition 8.

In a statement to Catholics issued in August, the bishops had written that the court ruling is a ?radical change in public policy? insofar as it ?discounts the biological and organic reality of marriage? what they consider ?the ideal relationship between a man and a woman for the purpose of procreation and the continuation of the human race.?

The ruling also ?diminishes the word *marriage* to mean only a ?partnership? a purely adult contractual arrangement for individuals over the age of 18,? according to the bishops.

Farrow told worshippers the bishops? support for Proposition 8 ?has placed me in a moral predicament.? He added, ?At what point do you cease to be an agent for healing and growth and become an accomplice of injustice??

He continued: ?The statement made by the bishop reaffirms the feelings of exclusion and alienation that are suffered by individuals and their loved ones who have left the church over this very issue. . . .

?How exactly is society helped by singling out a minority and excluding them from the union of love and life, which is marriage? How is marriage protected by intimidating gay and lesbian people into loveless and lonely lives? . . .

?This ?theology,? which is parroted by clerics in polished tones from pulpits, produces the very prejudice and hatred in our society which they claim to abhor. . . .

?I do not presume to tell you how to vote, but I do ask that you pray to the Creator of us all. Think and consider the effects of your vote on others, especially minorities in our society who are sitting next to you in church, and at work. ? Personally, I am morally compelled to vote ?No? on Proposition 8.?

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Farrow also told local media, he is a gay man. ?It?s a secondary issue. But, yes, I am,? he said.

Farrow told NCR Oct. 8 that he had taken a personal retreat this week. He said he had written to his bishop, John Steinbock, saying that he planned to return to the Newman Center and his job as pastor there Oct. 13.

A spokesman for the Fresno diocese said Farrow?s whereabouts were unknown and he had no comment about the priest?s status.

In 2000, Californian voters approved a similar initiative banning same-sex marriage by a wide margin (61 percent to 38 percent). But in May 2008, California?s highest court struck down that initiative, setting the stage for another ballot question.

This is the first time, however, voters anywhere will be asked to approve a marriage ban where same-sex couples have already wed. For that reason, all eyes are on California, often considered a cultural bellwether.

A Sept. 18 Field Poll found that 38 percent of likely voters support the initiative, with 55 percent opposed. A CBS poll, conducted Oct. 4-5 among 670 likely voters, showed Proposition 8 winning statewide by a five-point margin, 42-to-47 percent.

The San Diego Union-Tribune reports that supporters of the initiative have raised \$28.6 million -- including a \$1.275 million contribution from the Connecticut-based Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal order -- while opponents have pulled in \$21.4 million. Raising funds is crucial in California where television advertising sets the tone, tenor, and messaging for each side.

The economic benefits of equal marriage are also at play. Already, thousands of same sex couples have married in California and 51,000 more are expected to marry over the next three years. This increase, according to the Williams Institute of the University of California in Los Angeles, will help the state wedding industry grow by \$684 million and could create 2,100 new jobs. Equal marriage would add \$64 million in revenue to the state budget, according to the report.

On Election Day, Catholic voters could be key to the outcome. Catholics are the largest single denomination in the state, 31 percent, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, with Evangelical Protestants at 18 percent and Mormons at two percent. Those three denominations form the core religious support for the initiative.

How active will the church leadership be? "Each bishop will do his own thing," says Carol Hogan, director of pastoral projects and communications for the California Catholic Conference, the bishops' lobbying arm. "Some will be out there more than others."

In Los Angeles, Fr. Kevin Steen, a former Benedictine monk, is working to defeat Proposition 8.

"The bishops are trying to impose their theology on everybody else," said Steen, who works with California Faith for Equality, a statewide interfaith network of congregations and people of faith. "Marriage is a civil matter best left to [secular] authorities."

A member of the Catholic organization for gay, lesbian and transgender person, Dignity, Steen says he and others have written to Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahoney, requesting to speak with him. "We send letters and get form letters back. It's very sad and hurtful he won't speak with us and listen to our stories."

A spokesperson for the cardinal said Steen is not in official standing with the Los Angeles archdiocese.

(Chuck Colbert, a frequent contributor to NCR, writes from Boston.)

On the Web

The California bishops' statement supporting Proposition 8 is here: **"The issue before us is "marriage" -- an ancient, yet modern, human institution which pre-exists both Church and government."**

The text of Fr. Farrow's Oct. 6 homily is here: **Homily text**

The Web site for California Faith for Equality is **www.cafaithforequality.org**.

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