

Archbp asks for tolerance in same-sex debate

Dan Morris-Young Catholic News Service | Dec. 4, 2008

SAN FRANCISCO -- San Francisco's archbishop has appealed to people on both sides of the same-sex marriage issue to be tolerant of each other, to "disagree without being disagreeable" and not presume to know "the real motives" behind people's viewpoint.

"We need to stop hurling names like 'bigot' and 'pervert' at each other. And we need to stop it now," Archbishop George H. Niederauer said Dec. 1 in an open letter.

Voters in the state Nov. 4 passed a ballot initiative called Proposition 8, which is a constitutional amendment to define marriage as only "valid and recognized" if between a man and a woman.

Since Election Day there have been vigorous protests against the outcome in California and around the country by gay rights supporters.

Some of the demonstrations have targeted churches and in particular Mormon temples, because the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was a major funder of a campaign supporting the measure. The Catholic Church and other denominations also supported it.

On Nov. 19 the California Supreme Court agreed to decide constitutional issues stemming from voters' approval of the initiative but has denied requests to suspend enforcement of the initiative until the questions are resolved.

In his open letter, posted on the Archdiocese of San Francisco's Web site, www.sfarchdiocese.org, the archbishop said people "need to stop talking as if we are experts on the real motives of people with whom we have never even spoken."

He said that "tolerance, respect and trust are always two-way streets" and called on "churchgoers" to "speak and act out on the truth that all people are God's children and are unconditionally loved by God."

"Whoever they are, and whatever their circumstances, their spiritual and pastoral rights should be respected, together with their membership in the church," he wrote. "In that spirit, with God's grace and much prayer, perhaps we can all move forward together."

In the letter, the archbishop also:

-- Stated that the Archdiocese of San Francisco "did not donate or transfer any archdiocesan funds" to support Proposition 8.

-- Strongly criticized "voices in the wider community" which charged Proposition 8 backers with "hatred, prejudice and bigotry."

-- Defended faith communities' involvement in the political arena.

-- Underscored Proposition 8 backers' "defense of the traditional understanding and definition of marriage" as their motivation, rather than seeking to attack "any group" or "to deprive others of their civil rights."

Apparently responding to media claims that he had called on contacts within the Mormon church from his 11 years as bishop of Salt Lake City for help in the Proposition 8 campaign, the archbishop wrote, "I did write to them and they urged the members of their church, especially those in California, to become involved."

Mormon financial backing of Proposition 8 has been reported at \$22 million of the roughly \$35 million raised to promote the constitutional amendment. Total spending for both sides of the campaign surpassed \$75 million; it is said to be the costliest initiative campaign in U.S. history.

"It is important to point out here that a wide range of churches became active in favor of Proposition 8 in addition to Catholics and LDS members," Archbishop Niederauer said.

"Even though we supporters of Proposition 8 did not intend to hurt or offend our opponents, still many of them, especially in the gay community, feel hurt and offended," the archbishop wrote, then asked, "What is to be done?"

He continued, "Tolerance, respect and trust are always two-way streets, and tolerance respect and trust often do not include agreement, or even approval. We need to be able to disagree without being disagreeable.

"We need to stop talking as if we are experts on the real motives of people with whom we have never even spoken. We need to stop hurling names like 'bigot' and 'pervert' at each other. And we need to stop it now," he said.

In issuing its order on Proposition 8, the California Supreme Court directed supporters and opponents of the initiative to submit written arguments on three questions:

- Is it invalid because it constitutes a revision of, rather than an amendment to, the California Constitution?
- Does it violate the separation-of-powers doctrine under the California Constitution?
- If it is not unconstitutional, what is its effect, if any, on the marriages of same-sex couples performed before the adoption of Proposition 8?

The court issued its order in three cases protesting Proposition 8 as an unconstitutional override of the high court's ruling in May that same-sex couples have a right to designate their unions as marriage.

The parties in the cases include same-sex couples and a number of cities and counties that want to issue marriage licenses under the ruling. They claim the measure denies same-sex couples equal treatment under the law.

Contributing to this story was Rick DelVecchio.

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