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Maine diocese to focus on education about marriage, not political push

by Catholic News Service

PORTLAND, Maine -- Faced with a second referendum on same-sex marriage in three years, the Diocese of Portland will focus its efforts this time on education rather than contributing money or its name to a political campaign.

"We learned the last time around that we need to do a lot more effective teaching" about the nature of marriage as a union of a man and a woman, said Bishop Richard J. Malone of Portland at a March 2 news conference.

In November 2009, by a margin of 53 percent to 47 percent, Maine voters repealed a law allowing same-sex marriage in the state. Supporters of same-sex marriage have gathered enough signatures to place the issue before the voters again Nov. 6.

At the news conference, Malone made public a 22-page pastoral letter titled "Marriage: Yesterday, Today, Always," which he said will be "at the heart of our response" to current challenges facing the institution of marriage.

He said in 2009, the diocese had supported the repeal campaign through television ads and by holding a special collection at Masses. In addition, Malone said he sent an appeal for contributions to nearly every U.S. bishop.

"We don't have plans right now to do any of that," he said.

Malone, whose diocese covers the entire state, noted that Maine law says "the union of one man and one woman joined in traditional monogamous marriage is of inestimable value to society" and that the role of

government is to "encourage the traditional monogamous family unit as the basic building block of our society."

The pastoral letter said the Catholic view of marriage is based on Scripture and 2,000 years of church teaching, as well as on reason and natural law.

"We see marriage lived out in homes of the faithful and of no faith at all -- people who live this ideal by reason alone," Malone said. "Marriage is the foundation of family and society and it strengthens the loving and lasting intimacy of man and woman who are open to new life."

The bishop said discussion of "the contemporary proposal to redefine marriage to include two persons of the same sex" must begin with "respect for the inviolable and inherent dignity of every human person, including persons who experience same-sex attraction."

But, he said, "no one has a right to have the law or the institutions of the state call 'marriage' something other than what it is. Truth demands that we recognize as marriages only those unions that truly are marriages."

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Brian Souchet, director of the diocesan Office for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage, told Catholic News Service on Tuesday that some bloggers had summarized the news conference by "proclaiming that the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland will not be defending marriage this go-round," which he called "a gross misreading" of what the bishop said.

"I suspect that as Bishop Malone continues to speak out boldly and publicly in defense of marriage, they will think that they have been deceived, although the deception will have been of their own making," he added.

"Be assured that the pastoral letter, which has been in the works for some time, is not meant to be an abdication of our responsibility to defend marriage," Souchet said. "While it is true that we will not be taking as prominent a role on the ballot question committee as we did in 2009, ours will still be a complementary effort, one that focuses not just on the November referendum but beyond."

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