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Minnesota Catholics divided on marriage amendment

Zoe Ryan | Sep. 27, 2012

As faith outreach director for Minnesotans United for All Families, Lutheran pastor Grant Stevensen hears from a lot of Catholics who are torn between their faith life and their attitude toward gays and lesbians.

Like this man, whose mother is a lesbian: ?There?s no part of me that would not be Catholic. It?s in my bones. And yet this thing that?s in my bones rejects my own mother.?

Those conflicted Catholics and other Minnesotans will vote Nov. 6 on: ?Shall the Minnesota Constitution be amended to provide that only a union of one man and one woman shall be valid or recognized as a marriage in Minnesota?? Both sides of the issue are planning final events as their 18-month campaigns come to a close.

The Minnesota Catholic Conference also finds that some Catholics are against the amendment for very personal reasons, the conference?s communications associate, Jessica Zittlow, said. Concerns arise, however, over ?efforts to mislead them and the public concerning what the church teaches, and the effect of the marriage amendment,? she said.

Although the conference finds some Catholics who are conflicted, it also finds that the ?majority of Catholics, particularly those who attend church regularly and practice their faith, strongly support the marriage amendment.?

Minnesota for Marriage -- a coalition of groups, including the Minnesota State Catholic Conference -- is focusing on the importance of a marriage of one man and one woman for the benefit of children, Minnesota for Marriage spokeswoman Autumn Leva said. The recent Minnesota State Fair brought ?tens of thousands of new volunteers and supporters,? she said.

The Catholic church in the state has actively supported the amendment. The Minnesota Catholic Conference has about 450 church captains statewide for educational, prayer and outreach efforts with thousands of volunteers, from manning educational tables to get-out-the-vote activities such as house parties, Zittlow said. The conference has planned more than 75 educational events leading up to Nov. 6.

Zittlow said, ?When Catholics hear what the Catholic church actually says about the purpose of marriage in civil society, and why it supports the amendment, they recognize that the Catholic position is not ?anti? anyone, nor is it meant to be ?mean-spirited? or bigoted toward our fellow brothers and sisters with same-sex attraction.?

Still, some Catholics continue to oppose the amendment. About 300 recently appeared in a YouTube video singing of inclusiveness, said Michael Bayly, executive coordinator of Catholics for Marriage Equality MN, a group working on defeating the amendment and one of the partners with Minnesotans United for All Families, a coalition group opposing the amendment.

Bayly?s group also is working on defeating Minnesota?s other proposed amendment, the voter identification amendment.

Recently, the Minnesota Campaign Finance and Public Disclosure Board ruled in favor of a man who works for the Catholic church who wanted his $600 donation to Minnesotans United for All Families to remain anonymous for fear of losing his job. A priest in the Duluth diocese donated $1,000 to Minnesotans United for All Families and his name was made public. The diocese told the Duluth News Tribune that the priest was unaware his name would be made public.

Catholics make up Minnesota?s largest single religious denomination, nearing 1.1 million.

Minnesotans United for All Families has attracted many Catholic volunteers, partly because Catholics who want to talk about the issue have no other venue to speak, said Kate Brickman, spokeswoman for Minnesotans United for All Families.

The difference between Minnesota and other states that have debated this is that the Minnesota legislature voted May 2011 to put the amendment on the ballot, so people have had 18 months to prepare, whereas other states on average only had three to five months, Brickman said.

Another point is Minnesota?s historically high voter turnout. That is one reason why Minnesota for Marriage is focusing on educating voters and moving undecided voters, in addition to the fact that leaving the ballot blank counts as a ?no? vote, Leva said.

Even if the amendment is not passed, Minnesota has a law banning same-sex marriage. Some worry, however, that the law may be debated by future court cases.

?There is a definition of marriage in Minnesota,? Leva said. ?It will be decided either by the people of Minnesota or the courts.?

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