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Illinois bishop faces challenging audience at talk on same-sex marriage

by Michael Clancy

Phoenix — Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Springfield, Ill., walked into a beehive when he agreed to speak about same-sex marriage before a small audience in Phoenix over the weekend. But at least the bishop was there, taking the stings.

Paprocki joined Sr. Jeannine Gramick, a longtime advocate for gay and lesbian people, on the stage Friday in front of about 150 people at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ.

The presentation, organized by Robert Blair Kaiser and his group, Jesuit Alumni in Arizona, featured opening remarks from Paprocki and Gramick, then questions from the audience.

Paprocki understood he would be facing a challenging, if not hostile, audience. Recent public opinion polls have shown the majority of Catholics now support same-sex marriage.

Paprocki told the audience that the murder of his former church secretary, Mary Stachowicz, whose killer was a gay man, got little media attention compared to the 1998 homicide of Matthew Shepard, a gay Wyoming teen killed in a hate crime. Paprocki said the power of the gay lobby and favorable media reaction accounted for the difference.

He said the "gay activist lobby" forced the issue on the church and put the church in a defensive position. Still, he said, the church has one position, and it does not change.

"This event was billed as 'Two Catholic Views of Gay Marriage,' " he said. "But there is only one view that is authentically Catholic. The other view is dissenting."

He quoted from Pope John Paul II's letters and teachings and added that marriage is defined by "the potential to bring forth human life."

As Paprocki was speaking, one audience member, Anne Gray of Scottsdale, Ariz., shouted, "That's insulting." Paprocki ignored her.

He said if same-sex marriage is allowed, sadomasochism or other practices should be, too.

"If there is no moral truth, only alternatives, then everything should be OK," he said.

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Gramick reflected on changes in her own attitudes, attitudes of the public and attitudes of the church hierarchy. She said more and more church leaders are moving toward support of at least civil unions.

Referring to Paprocki's remark that morality cannot be based on polls, she said, "We may not legislate on the basis of polls, but they tell us what people are thinking."

She said polls show Catholics' opinions have moved from opposition to same-sex marriage to approval in a short time because nearly everyone has a gay friend, family member or business associate.

Then the questions started, and the bees started to sting.

The first person to speak, Brian Dugan of Green Valley, near the Mexico border, said Paprocki, who holds degrees in canon and civil law, sounded legalistic while Gramick sounded compassionate.

Paprocki said Gramick presented her case from an emotional position while he said the church's stance comes from the position of faith and reason.

"My position is not a question of anecdotal stories," he said.

In response to a question from Kaiser, Paprocki said the church would love to welcome gay people but is forced into a defensive position by "activists pushing an agenda." That set off Gray, who has a gay son, again.

"Here I am," she said. "The big scary gay agenda."

Paprocki said he could accept some legal protections for same-sex couples, but that same-sex marriage is "inimical to the common good" and civil unions often are marriage masquerading under another name.

Gray, an attorney, finally got her chance to address Paprocki directly.

"It is all about anecdotal stories," she said. "My son is a perfect human being. There is nothing intrinsically disordered about him. I know because I am his mother."

She said if bishops wanted to argue for traditional marriage because the sexes are complementary, then the bishops ought to invite women to their deliberations.

"You need to listen to mothers," she said.

By this time, not a single question was addressed to Gramick, and none would be.

One audience member asked the bishop how he viewed King David's relationship with two wives if marriage has not changed through history. Paprocki said that was a long time before the Catholic church and said the questioner was arguing for polygamy.

Another audience member asked about marriage between elderly people who would never have children. Paprocki recommended reading the biblical story of Abraham's wife, Sarah, who got pregnant at an old age.

One of the youngest people in the room said she was a devout Catholic, but when her aunt and sister told her they were gay, she was put on the spot. She asked Paprocki if she could remain a good Catholic and still support her family members in their desires to form lifelong relationships.

"It is a struggle to be a good Catholic while supporting gay marriage," the bishop said. "It strains your relationship with the church."

He said those who oppose the church on the issue should become Protestants. "They do a lot of good things too," he said.

Two issues did not come up: the Boy Scouts' recent policy change allowing gay scouts and Paprocki's role on the three-bishop panel overseeing Vatican-imposed changes to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

The gathering broke up after two and a half hours, even though people were lined up to talk to Paprocki.

[Michael Clancy is a reporter for *The Arizona Republic*.]

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