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Prop 8 has Catholics divided at the parish level

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Opinion

Researchers will tell you: it takes a lot to stir American Catholics out of their pews and into engagement with their church and parish. Most people are content to sit through Mass, grab a donut on the way out, and get moving with their Sunday.

One hot topic changed all that on a Sunday last November in my Southern California parish: the battle over Proposition 8, the anti-gay marriage ballot initiative supported by the Catholic Church and eventually approved by voters.

First a little recent news: the Los Angeles Times noted in an editorial [1] that Prop. 8 continues to divide the state. The locus of that lingering anger is state now Supreme Court Chief Justice Ronald George -- who's had the poor luck to rule both in favor and against single-sex marriage.

Early last year, George ruled legislators couldn't ban same-sex marriage on their own. But when voters did just that via the ballot, George then sided with them -- ruling the will of the people should not be overturned by court fiat. So now both sides in the debate are going after him.

This house-divided scenario reminded me of that Sunday last year at my parish, just two weeks before the election. As my family and I walked into church, we noticed large yellow anti-Prop 8 banners flying from the front lawn and draped over chain link fences. Inside, a guest celebrant -- a priest from a neighboring parish filling in at the main 10 o'clock mass -- delivered a homily that mixed a little Elmer Gantry with a lot of talk radio, coming down hard in favor of Prop. 8 and against "the Democratic candidate for President." He directed the congregation to flyers piled up in the church vestibule listing pro-life reasons not to vote for the Democrat.

When his homily ended, there was at first a stunned silence, followed by a smattering of applause, and then a mini-walk-out as two or three people got up and left. A deep political divide that I did not know existed in my parish was ripped open and revealed.

After Mass, I joined several people who approached our pastor, decrying the banners and a homily we felt crossed the church-state line; the choir wrote up a petition expressing the same thing. At the same time,

parishioners who put up the signs said they were in the right -- following the expressed wishes of L.A.'s Cardinal Roger Mahony.

The pastor -- a very patient Irishman on the verge of retirement -- worked to restore peace. The banners remained for the day, but were gone the next Sunday.

Still, the memory remains. In my parish, a lot of members work in various parts of the entertainment industry: carpenters, grips, costumers, make-up artists, sound engineers, etc. Through their work, they deal with all kinds of people each day -- including gay men and women involved in deep and committed relationships. More than a few gay people call this parish home: they are there every Sunday, they help out during the week.

Once you know people as people, it's difficult to reduce their concerns and their lives to a banner stuck in the church lawn. Our parish,like many others in California, walk a fine line -- working hard to keep everyone in the Catholic Big Tent.

Proposition 8 demonstrated how fragile that big tent can be, how easily it can fold. A parish in San Francisco was vandalized after the Prop. 8 vote, even though it had been known as "gay friendly" for decades. Nothing even remotely like that happened at my parish -- but our quiet, pleasant group of believers, our nice suburban community of Catholics, got a little whiff of the culture wars.

Everyone calmed down quickly enough -- we're friends and neighbors first; would-be political-activists much further down the list. But as California continues to wrestle with Proposition 8 and its fallout -- I think we do, too.

Source URL (retrieved on *04/19/2014 - 18:18*): http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/prop-8-has-catholics-divided-parish-level

Links:
[1] http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-ed-court14-2009jun14,0,3081334.story