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Down to the wire

Dennis Coday | Nov. 3, 2009 NCR Today

Voters in many locales and states are going to the polls today. In my little corner of democracy we vote on a city measure to ban smoking in all public areas and whether or not to renew a 1/8 cent sales tax to support county law enforcement. I don't expect too much media attention in my hometown.

The election in Maine won't be as quiet. Voters there are being asked to vote yes or no on Question 1, which reads: "Do you want to reject the new law that lets same-sex couples marry and allows individuals and religious groups to refuse to perform these marriages?"

Chuck Colbert, who writes for NCR on occasion, is in Maine monitoring the election. He sent an assessment of the Maine election that we put on the web site at the end of last week. (See In Maine, same-sex marriage is a Catholic issue [1].)

Chuck is there again for Election Day and he says the campaign is incredibly close. He sent this info this morning as the polls opened:

> Down to the wire, Maine voters appear to be evenly divided on the marriage referendum. A most recent poll -- released yesterday -- showed advocates of voting "Yes" on Question run, that is, rejecting the law that allows same-sex marriage -- with a 51 to 47 percent lead.
>
> Based in Raleigh, N. C., Public Policy Polling (http://publicpolicypolling.blogspot.com/) surveyed 1,133 likely voters from Oct. 31 through Nov. 1. The survey's margin of error is plus or minus 2.9%.
>
> Coming after a poll released two weeks ago, which showed Question 1 in a straight-up tie at 48 percent in favor and 48 perecent opposed, the latest findings suggest a shift, "a slight movement toward its passage because independents support it (52 percent to 46 percent) and because there are more Democrats (27 percent) in favor of it than there are Republicans opposed to it (22 percent)," according to a press release of the survey results.

Chuck says the apparent even split among the electorate has motivated both sides to get their supporters to the polls.

Sunday Chuck met Pamella Starbird Beliveau of Lewiston, Maine, who was removed as a lector and Eucharistic Minister [2] after her pastor read an opinion piece she wrote for the local newspaper approving of same-sex marriage.

Beliveau was with about two-dozen gay marriage backers, members of a new group Catholics for Marriage Equality, rallying outside the cathedral of the local dioceseduring the 10 a.m. Mass.

"I am sad but not surprised by what happened? to me, she told the gathering and local broadcast media

yesterday. ?The Catholic Church has every right to determine who can and cannot serves as ministers in the Church. I respect that.? Nonetheless, Beliveau said. ?We must keep our eyes focused on the issue and that is equality for our gay and lesbian citizens."

About 700 Maine Catholics who support same-sex marriage have signed either a newspaper ad or a declaration of support for same-sex marriage being circulated by the Portland-based Catholics for Marriage Equality.

Fifteen percent of Maine's population is Catholic, and Portland?s Bishop Richard J. Malone has been a leader in the campaign to repeal the state's law legalizing same sex marriage. The diocese has given $550,000 to the effort to repeal the same-sex marriage legislation. The Catholic fraternal organization, the Knights of Columbus, has given another $50,000 to the cause.

This morning on the diocese's Web site, Malone has a statement titled REFERENDUM ALERT TO FAITHFUL CATHOLICS [3] warning "faithful" Catholics against "a group of self-described Catholics who have chosen to dissent publicly from established Catholic doctrine on the nature of marriage."

Here's his full statement:

> A group of self-described Catholics who have chosen to dissent publicly from established Catholic doctrine on the nature of marriage as the union of one man and one woman recently published a paid political ad entitled ?Statement of Conscience by Maine Catholics Regarding Marriage Equality.?
>
> The evidence for their dissent runs through the statement and is crystallized in the following sentence: ??we find disturbing any suggestion that formal Church teaching obligates all Catholics to oppose marriage equality.?
>
> In contrast, please let your conscience be formed by these clear and authoritative words of Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger): ?In those situations where homosexual unions ? have been given the legal status and rights belonging to marriage, clear and emphatic opposition is a duty."
> (Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, July 2003)
>
> A Catholic whose conscience has been properly formed by Scripture and the teachings of the Catholic Church cannot support same sex marriage. Please vote YES on question 1.
>
> Most Reverend Richard J. Malone, Th.D.
> Bishop of Portland

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/news/politics/maine-same-sex-marriage-catholic-issue
[2] http://ncronline.org/news/gay-marriage-supporter-removed-ministries
[3] http://www.portlanddiocese.net/info.php?info_id=205