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Group aims to mobilize Catholics for equality

Dennis Coday | Sep. 29, 2010

People gather near the U.S. Capitol during a gay rights demonstration in Washington Oct. 11, 2009. (CNS photo/Molly Riley, Reuters)

In recent state ballot initiatives about marriage laws, the Catholic church and Catholic allies have used deep pockets and organizational strength to speak out for state laws that would define marriage as between a man and a woman.

But a group of politically savvy Catholics say the bishops are out of step with the majority of Catholics on this question, and on Sept. 14, they launched a new effort that plans to use grass-roots organizing and community building ?to mobilize the 62 percent of American Catholics who support freedoms for all people regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity ... [and] channel that support into action for legislative, political and cultural change.?

The group is called Catholics for Equality.

Fr. Joseph Palacios, a founding board member of the group and a sociologist and adjunct professor at Georgetown University in Washington, cites a May survey by Gallup that found that 52 percent of Americans say that gay and lesbian relations are morally acceptable, the highest acceptance rate since 2006. Among Catholics, support jumps to 62 percent, up from 46 percent in 2006.

Most American Catholics, Palacios said, ?want to do the right thing from their American core values and the heritage of Catholic social justice values. We want to move the best of those Catholic values and American values toward voting for [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered] freedoms and we want to help them have a cultural voice in helping shift the American community to a more open, pluralistic society.?

During a teleconference unveiling the new group, the organizers talked about the technology one has come to expect in today?s political environment: social media, blogs, Web sites, and smart phone aps. But the technology has a very personal aspect, according to Phil Attey, the acting executive director. ?We are finding creative ways to have dialogue in places where it is being suppressed.?

As one strategy, the group is asking people to organize ?Equality Sunday Brunches? and invite fellow Catholics,

friends and family to meet and hear from community leaders, parish leaders and pro-equality supporters, said Aniello Alioto, another founding board member.

?The brunches and people getting to know their neighbors are a critical aspect,? Palacios said. ?One of the key findings in politics right now is that [homosexual] rights and freedoms will only be won when people know someone who is gay, lesbian or transsexual.?

Attey said, ?We have to trust that ordinary Catholics know love, commitment and family when they see it. They see lesbian and gay parishioners bringing their kids to Mass and raising them in the Catholic church. They see their gay and lesbian family members forming families and raising them Catholic. They know love when they see it.

?So to counter the messages of the hierarchy is very easy,? he said. ?We just have to provide the truth of these relationships, and let Catholics make up their own minds.?

Other principals of Catholics for Equality include: Anne Underwood, a leader in Maine?s Catholics for Marriage Equality; Patsy Trujillo, a former state representative from Santa Fe, N.M.; Eugene McMullan, lead organizer of Catholics for Marriage Equality in California; Charles Martel, a clinical social worker and co-coordinator of Roman Catholics for Marriage Equality in Massachusetts; and Tony Adams, a resigned Catholic priest who writes for *Queer New York* and *South Florida Gay News*.

The group?s immediate goal is ?getting our message out there that we exist and that we can provide information and some guidance in how to approach the conversation of [gay] equality as it relates to the Catholic church,? said Alioto.

Outreach this year, he said, will allow the group to have an impact on state legislative campaigns, national issues and state ballot initiatives in 2011.

Catholics for Equality will have much to counter.

The U.S. Catholic bishops? conference has made ?strengthening marriage? one of its top five priorities through 2011, with the stated goal ?to work for laws and public policies that recognize marriage as a union of a man and a woman.?

Last year, the Portland, Maine, diocese issued an appeal to U.S. dioceses and collected money from 50 to contribute more than $550,000 to a campaign to reject a Maine law that extended civil marriage to gay and lesbian couples. Maine voters rejected the same-sex marriage law 53 to 47 percent.

In 2008, a California voter initiative, known as Proposition 8, overrode a California Supreme Court ruling that had enlarged the definition of marriage to include all couples. Proposition 8 defined marriage as limited to a man and a woman and it passed by 52 percent to 48 percent.

A major organizer on the side of traditional marriage in California and Maine was the National Organization for Marriage, a 501(c)4 organization, a tax-exempt nonprofit that can engage in lobbying or political campaigning. The Catholic fraternal order of the Knights of Columbus reports that it gave $500,000 to the National Organization for Marriage in 2008 and $1.4 million in 2009. In 2008, the Knights also gave $1.15 million to the California group ProtectMarriage.com [1], which was endorsed by the California Catholic Conference.

The Knights gave $418,000 to the U.S. bishops? Ad Hoc Committee for the Defense of Marriage in 2009. This summer, the committee launched ?Marriage: Unique for a Reason,? a campaign using print material, the Internet and DVDs to ?catechize and educate Catholics on the meaning of marriage as the union of one man and

one woman.?

The battle over Proposition 8 may be reemerging. In August a federal judge overturned Proposition 8. Chicago Cardinal Francis E. George, president of the U.S. Catholic bishops? conference, called the ruling ?tragic.?

In late September, the bishops of Minnesota mailed DVDs to Catholic households with a letter about the dangers of legalizing same-sex marriage. See related story below.

The bishops suggested that Catholics contact their state legislators and tell them to stop any action that would expand the legal definition of marriage. The Web site, CatholicNewsAgency.com [2], reported Sept. 19 that the St. Paul and Minneapolis archdiocese had brought in Maggie Gallagher, chairman of the National Organization for Marriage, to discuss strategies for opposing the redefinition of marriage.

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Minnesota bishops' DVD campaign urges traditional marriage be protected

By Catholic News Service

ST. PAUL, Minn. (CNS) -- Minnesota's Catholic bishops have sent a letter and DVD to Catholics in the state about the church's response to measures recently introduced in the state Legislature that would change the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples.

"As the chief pastor of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, I am writing to let you know of an important development that, if successful, will profoundly impact families throughout Minnesota," Archbishop John C. Nienstedt said. "That is, the organized effort to redefine marriage in our state."

During the 2010 legislative session, five bills to redefine marriage were introduced.

"Defining marriage as simply a union of consenting parties will change the core meaning of marriage in the public square for every Minnesotan," the archbishop said. "At best, so-called same-sex marriage is an untested social experiment and, at worst, it poses a dangerous risk with potentially far-reaching consequences."

If same-sex marriage were legalized in Minnesota, the law would require public schools to teach children that same-sex marriage and traditional marriage are the same, the archbishop wrote.

In the video, Archbishop Nienstedt calls for an opportunity for citizens to vote on a state constitutional amendment to preserve the traditional definition of marriage.

"At best, so called same-sex marriage is an untested social experiment," he said. "And at worst, it poses a dangerous risk with potentially far-reaching consequences. An exercise of caution should be in order."

The cost of producing the DVD, titled "One Man, One Woman -- Marriage and the Common Good," was covered by an anonymous donor covered the cost of the campaign.

In a column in the September issue of his diocesan newspaper, The Courier, Bishop John M. Quinn of Winona urged Catholics to talk to their legislators and urge them to oppose any effort to redefine marriage.

"Any other kind of relationship simply is not a marriage," he said. "This is our time to stand up and defend marriage as a unique institution that, from the beginning of human history and in every culture, is the union of one man and one woman for the propagation of the human family and the upbringing of children."

Thirty-one states have adopted constitutional amendments defining marriage as a union of one man and one woman, Chris Leifeld, executive director of the Minnesota Catholic Conference, pointed out.

"The Minnesota Catholic bishops agree that Minnesota should follow this lead and let the people of Minnesota decide this issue, not our judges or legislators," Leifeld said.

In a related development, the Star Tribune daily newspaper reported that the rector of the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis suspended a woman from her part-time job there because she said she planned to collect the DVDs sent to Catholics and turn them into a protest sculpture.

Artist Lucinda Naylor told the Star Tribune she had to stand up for what she believes and while she was disappointed about her suspension, she was not surprised. Naylor, who has been an artist in residence at the basilica for 15 years, disagrees with the church teaching against same-sex marriage.

Archdiocesan spokesman Dennis McGrath told the newspaper that the rector, Father John Bauer, made the decision to suspend Naylor, but said the archdiocese supported it.

McGrath called the priest's action "pretty logical" when someone who works for the church lobbies against church teaching. He said he doesn't know of any organization that would keep someone who opposes "the main thrust of what you're doing."

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