NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Catholics face 'mutiny' over teachings on gay marriage

Daniel Burke Religion News Service | Oct. 4, 2010

Members of the Knights of Columbus arrive at a rally in support of California's Proposition 8 at a football stadium in San Diego Nov. 1, 2009. (CNS photo/Mike Blake, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- For 13 years, Fr. Joseph Palacios lived, prayed, and studied with the Jesuits. But he left the Roman Catholic order in 2005 because he would not profess a vow of obedience to the pope.

?I felt that I could still be a Catholic priest,? Palacios said, ?but I could not deal with that kind of scrutiny and command from the top.?

Now, the 59-year-old priest and adjunct professor at Georgetown University, the nation?s oldest Catholic university, is again at odds with the church?s hierarchy, this time on one of its signature issues: the definition of marriage.

In recent years, Catholic bishops have used their moral influence and deep pockets to push for bans on same-sex unions in states from California to Maine.

But a new corps of increasingly vocal Catholics is urging a ?mutiny? against the hierarchy, in the words of one activist, particularly on gay marriage and related matters.

For example, on Sept. 14, Palacios and other advocates launched Catholics for Equality, a group that aims to persuade believers in the ?movable middle? to defy the bishops and support civil rights for gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people.

Similarly, on Wednesday, Sept. 29 four Catholic groups with a combined 112 years of activism on gay issues announced the formation of Equally Blessed, a coalition dedicated to providing a voice for ?faithful, pro-equality? Catholics.

Also this week, a mailing of 400,000 DVDs sent to every registered Catholic family in Minnesota, explaining the church?s position on marriage sparked a ?Return the DVD? campaign; a Catholic artist pledged to make a sculpture with discarded discs.

The ?defense of marriage? is a top priority for the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference, which formed a special

committee last year to promote church teachings through mailings, videos, and political activism. The committee?s $418,000 annual budget will be bankrolled by the Knights of Columbus through 2011.

?Much of the public discussion has been focused on rights,? said Andrew Lichtenwalner, a program specialist for the bishops? marriage committee. ?What the bishops are doing is teaching about the unique meaning and purpose of marriage, which has been missing from the conversation.?

Palacios, who teaches sociology at Georgetown, says surveys show Catholics ?are more accepting of LGBT people than any other Christian group.? He cited a May 2010 Gallup Poll in which 62 percent of Catholics said gay and lesbian relationship are ?morally acceptable? -- a 16 percent increase from just four years ago.

Other polls show Catholics are more ambivalent about gay marriage and adoption by gay couples, both of which the bishops oppose.

Catholic gay-rights supporters have been emboldened by the example of nuns who bucked the bishops by supporting the health-care overhaul Congress passed last March, said Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, one of the groups involved in Equally Blessed.

?People are using that as a touchstone,? he said. ?They see that the nuns were courageous and they feel like they can be courageous. Courage is contagious.?

But one man?s courage is another?s heresy, and the bishops are keen to quell dissent within the church.

The artist who suggested the DVD sculpture has been suspended from her artist-in-residence job at the Basilica of St. Mary in Minneapolis. Groups such as New Ways have been deemed inauthentic Catholics. Last week, the bishops? doctrine committee issued a sharp, point-by-point rebuke of a book by two theologians that challenged church teaching on sexuality. Priests who support gay marriage have been silenced or removed from ministry.

Palacios, who is openly gay, says he knows the risks and has been careful not to give the impression that he speaks for the church. He said he rarely wears a cleric?s collar in public, and his biographies on the websites of Georgetown and Catholics for Equality omit references to his ordination. Palacios also said he is not advocating against church dogma -- just its political positions on gay issues.

But Catholic leaders say there is no wiggle room between the two, and Palacios is shirking his priestly duties.

?The role of a priest is to help people understand more deeply the teachings of the church,? said Susan Gibbs, a spokeswoman for the Archdiocese of Washington, where Palacios works, ?not to simply move with the winds of secular culture.?

As is common practice in the church, Palacios was given priestly faculties -?sanction to perform the sacraments -- when he moved to Washington from Los Angeles, where he was ordained, Gibbs said. Gibbs said she raised questions with Los Angeles officials last year after Palacios testified in favor of gay marriage before Washington?s city council.

The Archdiocese of Los Angeles said of Palacios? advocacy: ?We are now aware of it and are assessing his participation? in Catholics for Equality.

Georgetown University, which has been criticized for employing a priest who advocates against church teachings, said Palacios was hired to teach part-time on the merits of his credentials, ?not based on any affiliation he may have with external organizations that is conducted in a personal capacity.?

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