

U.S. bishops see 'ray of light' in Prop 8 outcome

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 15, 2008

Amid what many American bishops saw as a rather dismal election with regard to traditional 'faith and values' issues, several prelates during their recent meeting in Baltimore pointed to Proposition 8 in California as a ray of light.

'Strengthening marriage' is one of five top priorities the U.S. bishops have identified through 2011. The success of an anti-gay marriage measure in California, usually seen as among the 'bluest' of the blue states, seemed to embolden the bishops in defense of marriage as a union between a man and a woman.

'Marriage is not an institution created by the church, or by the state,' said Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in remarks to reporters in Baltimore. 'It's a natural institution, a universal institution.'

'To imagine that we can change it by a vote or by a court decision is an example of hubris,' George said, arguing that the victory of Proposition 8 shows that 'people recognize that people feel that.'

Proposition 8, which in effect overturned a state Supreme Court decision declaring same-sex marriage as a fundamental right, passed by a margin of 52 to 48 percent. Supporters and opponents of the measure poured a combined total of almost \$80 million into the campaign, making it the most expensive race in the country with the exception of the presidential contest.

In particular, the bishops seemed to draw two conclusions from the success of Proposition 8:

- Minority voters may represent important allies on 'faith and values' issues, especially gay marriage;
- The victory of Barack Obama in the presidential race should not be interpreted as a mandate for radical social change.
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Archbishop George Niederauer of San Francisco noted the irony that African-Americans in California, 'on the same day and at the same polling places,' voted in strong numbers both for Obama and for the ban on same-sex marriage.

Exit polls in California show that African-Americans backed Proposition 8 by a roughly 2-to-1 margin, and because African-American voters were energized by Obama, their turnout was unusually high.

'For months we were told that this is a civil rights issue,' Niederauer said. 'Yet the group most searingly familiar with civil rights battles in America voted in favor of the proposition by 70 percent. They did not see the issue as conservative/liberal, but rather the way we presented it - as a defense of traditional marriage.'

Niederauer cautioned against building a political strategy for the church based exclusively on 'looking at this or

that ethnic group," but said that African-American support for Proposition 8 was so "noticeable" that it "calls for analysis and study."

The bishops also repeatedly insisted that it would be a mistake for the incoming Obama administration to interpret the election as a warrant for liberal social policies.

"The victories on marriage amendments in California, Florida, etc., were a bright spot, especially since many of the same people also voted for Obama," said Bishop Thomas Wenski of Orlando, Florida. He suggested those results mean the election "was not a mandate to move ideologically to an extremist position."

George asserted that the 2008 elections amounted to "1932 revisited," in the sense that once again, Americans have spurned the policies of an incumbent Republican in favor of the Democrats to guide the country through an economic crisis.

"The value questions are still there, as the referenda on the nature of marriage in several states makes clear," George said. "They're still resonant in hearts of voters."

"The overall election," George said, "means that the American people are hoping for a government to help them through the present economic debacle."

As part of a broader discussion of the goals and objectives of the USCCB during their Nov. 10-13 meeting in Baltimore, the bishops approved a goal of "working for laws and policies that protect, promote, and strengthen marriage."

A subcommittee led by Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Kentucky, is also working on a new document on marriage on behalf of the conference. Kurtz said in Baltimore that he hopes a draft will be ready for the

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