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'Money talked' in NY, says church official

Zoe Ryan | Aug. 16, 2011

Gov. Andrew Cuomo marches in the Gay Pride Parade in New York City June 26. (CNS/Reuters/Jessica Rinaldi)

Though the New York Catholic church loudly opposed legalizing same-sex marriage, a postmortem of this summer?s legislative battle found that money and political clout drowned out the church?s voice, according to a spokesperson for the New York Catholic Conference.

?Money talked,? said communications director Dennis Poust.

Money as well as political clout and the mainstream media that ?was openly cheerleading? for the bill influenced the decision, and the Catholic church did not have the excessive funds that the same-sex marriage proponents had, he said.

Poust spoke with Catholic News Service in June and answered questions from *NCR* through e-mail in August.

?As far as the money, first of all, it is just not there,? he said. ?Dioceses in New York and around the country are struggling mightily to keep the ministries going and keep the lights on. But even if the church was rolling in money, we are forbidden by federal tax law from making direct political contributions.?

In May, *The New York Times* reported that wealthy Republican donors gave more than $1 million to gay rights coalition New Yorkers United for Marriage, and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg gave $100,000, making those donors responsible for about two-thirds of the group?s fundraising, according to the Times.

Bloomberg contributed $10,300 to the re-election campaigns of senators who switched their ?no? votes to ?yes?: four Republicans and one of three Democrats who switched their vote. The legal maximum that an individual can give to a state general election in New York is $10,300.

Bloomberg and ?his bottomless well of money was a significant influence, but there were many moneyed interests involved, as well as political calculations and a very popular, very driven governor intent on moving his agenda through,? Poust said.

He added that New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo ?obviously strongly influenced? the four Republicans and the three Democrats who switched from no to yes. ?What they were promised we may never know.?

The church was on the winning side in Maine Nov. 3, 2009, when voters passed a referendum to repeal legalizing same-sex marriage. The Portland diocese had asked Maine Catholics as well as other bishops and dioceses around the country for donations to the campaign to reject same-sex marriage. It received roughly $550,000 in donations (*NCR*, Nov. 25, 2009).

New York dioceses didn?t ask for money because New York?s law started as a legislative bill, not a referendum. Money affects both a little differently, Poust said.

?A referendum goes directly to the people so you don?t have to convince legislators, who are influenced by campaign contributions, promises of pet projects being funded, favorable redistricting lines and other perks,? he said. ?In a referendum, it is simply a matter of letting the people vote their consciences in the privacy of the voting booth.

?From other states? experiences, it seems in those cases that it often becomes a very expensive advertising war to get out the vote. New York does not have a system of initiative and referendum so laws cannot arise organically from the populace as they can in, say, California.?

On the other side, Francis DeBernardo, executive director of New Ways Ministry, a national organization that serves gay and lesbian Catholics, said, ?Ballot initiatives are much more open to abuse by external forces, and rely less on public opinion and more on who can turn out the vote.?

?When elected officials have to take a stand on a controversial issue, they risk their careers, so they are more careful about voting in a way that reflects not only constituents? views, but that also reflects their own personal integrity,? DeBernardo said.

None of the nine entities that legalized same-sex marriage -- Massachusetts, Connecticut, California, Maine, Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire, New York and the District of Columbia -- did so with a referendum vote; all were due to court rulings and legislation. However, two states (California and Maine) that allowed same-sex marriage for a short time had it repealed by a referendum.

Of the 31 states that have held referendums on same-sex marriage, none have approved it. A same-sex marriage ban was defeated in Arizona in 2006, but a referendum two years later reversed that vote and upheld the ban.

Poust said that the New York Catholic Conference?s strategy for the same-sex marriage bill was not unlike other bills on which it advocates. It directly lobbied legislators and also encouraged people to contact their legislators.

In 2009, New York?s then-Gov. David Patterson had supported a similar measure, but it was defeated in the Senate. Cuomo, a Catholic, supported the same-sex marriage bill, and he reached out to citizen groups that supported it, telling them they had to be better organized than in 2009. These groups formed a coalition that raised and spent $3 million on a television and radio campaign.

Organizations on both sides have vowed to help or defeat those who voted in favor of the bill when they are up for re-election. The gay-rights coalition New Yorkers United for Marriage said it would spend $1 million on the re-election campaigns of the senators who switched their no votes to yes, while the National Organization for Marriage, a Washington-based nonprofit, said it would spend $2 million to defeat senators who voted yes.

The next battleground states are Minnesota, where a referendum will appear on the 2012 ballot, and possibly North Carolina, whose legislature will decide this fall if a referendum to ban same-sex marriage will be on the 2012 ballot. Other possible debates on either introducing a measure or repealing one could be in Maine, Oregon, New Hampshire and Maryland.

[Zoe Ryan is an *NCR* intern. Her e-mail address is zryan@ncronline.org.]

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