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# Washington newspaper readers split on church's role in same-sex marriage petition

Dan Morris-Young | May. 7, 2012 NCR Today

Almost 5,400 online readers of *The News Tribune* in Tacoma, Wash., weighed in on its recent website poll asking, "Do you think it's appropriate for the Catholic Church to promote petitions for anti-gay marriage Referendum 74?"

The "Yes" answer ("Exercising a constitutional right on an important issue") garnered 49 percent approval. The "No" option ("Heavy-handed mixing of politics and religion") drew 51 percent.

Referendum 74 is a ballot measure that would seek to overturn Washington state's recently passed law allowing same-sex marriage. Supporters need to submit about 120,500 validated signatures by June 6 to qualify the referendum for the ballot. They are seeking 150,000 for safe measure.

Seattle Archbishop J. Peter Sartain supports the petition campaign. He and Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo Almaguer sent a 1,000-word letter in early April to parishes outlining their reasons for backing the effort to defend a traditional definition of marriage and encouraging support for signature-gathering efforts.

The archbishop also provided pastors discretion on whether or not to stage signature-gathering as a parish activity.

The letter and parish signature-gathering made headlines after several parishes declined to take part in the campaign, notably St. James Cathedral Parish [1].

Its pastor, Fr. Michael Ryan, sent a brief email April 11 to parishioners stating, "After discussing the matter with the members of the Cathedral's pastoral ministry team, I have decided that we will not participate in the collection of signatures in our parish. Doing so would, I believe, prove hurtful and seriously divisive in our community."

Ryan told *NCR* in April that he "tried to give a unifying message in my homily" for April 15 weekend Masses.

"It seems to have been very well received at five Masses," he said. "As far as people's reactions are concerned, I received many expressions of gratitude and no negative comments from parishioners for not allowing the collection of signatures for the referendum. I suppose these came from people with a certain bias in my favor."

He added, "I found it interesting that the majority of comments came from older married couples who have raised their families in the church."

In his homily, Ryan said, "When it comes to core Catholic teachings, we can certainly question in order to better understand. In fact, we ought to. But we don't have the luxury of picking and choosing. It's different, however, when it comes to matters involving practical political judgments and actions. Here, before God and in the community of the church, we are likely to question as we prayerfully and carefully form our own consciences,

search our own consciences and vote our own consciences -- always striving to be faithful to the word of God, the teaching of the church, and the Holy Spirit within us. In the end, we must strive to be our best selves, our most Christian selves, and must always keep squarely in mind the God-given value of every human person as well as the needs of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized."

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