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Minnesota gears up for November marriage vote

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A state trooper stands by as demonstrators on both sides of the gay marriage issue gather outside the Minnesota House in St. Paul in May 2011. (AP Photo/Jim Mone)

Catholics -- numbering around 1.1 million -- make up the largest single religious denomination in Minnesota, and they are gearing up for November when voters will decide whether to approve a constitutional amendment that defines marriage as solely between one man and one woman.

Currently, Minnesota law only permits marriage between one woman and one man. However, worry over potential legal challenges to that law compelled the legislature to propose a constitutional amendment.

The Catholic church in Minnesota has been one of the most, if not the most, active religious groups in support of the constitutional amendment, which is in line with Catholic church teaching about marriage.

At the same time, notable opposition to the law has come from inside the church, from groups of priests opposed to the amendment and from Catholics who have joined organizations opposed to the proposed statute.

North Carolina recently amended its constitution to ban same-sex marriage, making it the 31st state to do so. Vigorous campaigning by religious groups supporting the ban were instrumental in the victory, organizers said.

A coalition of conservative and religious groups in Washington state blocked a gay marriage law from going into effect June 6 when it submitted 200,000 signatures seeking a public vote on the law, which was passed by the legislature and signed by the governor earlier this year. The referendum vote on the law will be on the November ballot.

The Catholic church?s role in the Washington referendum campaign made headlines when Seattle?s Archbishop J. Peter Sartain and Auxiliary Bishop Eusebio Elizondo Almaguer sent a 1,000-word letter to parishes encouraging them to support Referendum 74 signature-gathering.

Some parishes, including Seattle?s St. James Cathedral, declined to allow signature-collection efforts.

In Minnesota, the Catholic church?s campaign in favor of the amendment includes the formation of parish

marriage committees to educate parishioners on marriage and the consequences of a change in definition, according to the website of the Minnesota Catholic Conference, the public policy arm of the church in the state.

The St. Paul and Minneapolis archdiocese also provided a marriage prayer for each parish for use during Mass as part of the prayer of the faithful.

In the fall of 2010, Catholics in the state received DVDs with a message from St. Paul and Minneapolis Archbishop John Nienstedt expressing the church?s position on marriage as only between one man and one woman. An anonymous donor provided the cost of the DVDs and shipping. The timing led to some criticism: The DVDs were mailed in September, when no marriage amendment was on the ballot, but before a tight November gubernatorial election.

For this amendment, though, the Minnesota Catholic Conference said it has heard from thousands of Catholics statewide and ?found that they are overwhelmingly in support of the amendment.?

More than a thousand Catholics gathered in front of the state capital May 6 for the 65th Annual May Day Family Rosary Procession and prayed in support of the amendment, according to a Minnesota Public Radio news report.

Other groups have been advocating in support of the amendment as well, such as Minnesota for Marriage, a coalition of evangelical and Catholic groups.

However, as was the case in other states, some Catholics have been vocal about their disagreement with the church?s campaign.

Coalition groups such as Minnesotans United for All Families -- which includes faith groups -- have formed to oppose the amendment.

Also, three retired Catholic priests wrote a letter in May to the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* newspaper (although it was not published) and held a press conference May 17 in Minneapolis, expressing their opposition to the Catholic church?s campaigning on the issue. Minnesota Public Radio took up the story and posted the letter online along with the story.

Although the priests said they agree with the church?s position on sacramental marriage, they opposed a state constitutional amendment that would deny rights and privileges to same-sex unions. Asserting that ?there is not just one way for Catholics to vote in November,? they ask the letter reader to consider voting against the amendment.

?We feel that our church is stronger when both sides of an issue are part of the public dialogue,? the letter stated.

The St. Paul and Minneapolis archdiocese quickly issued a response to the letter, saying that the letter was ?factually incorrect and does not represent Catholic teaching.?

The statement by the archdiocese also said that the amendment ?only affirms current state law? and would not prevent ?any two people to share or distribute property, direct medical care, visit loved ones in the hospital, or attend to personal needs at the point of death, among other things. These rights already exist and will remain intact.?

Nienstedt earlier had sent a letter to priests that instructed there should be no ?open dissension? regarding the church?s stance on the marriage amendment, according to a January story in the *Star Tribune*.

Also on May 17, a group representing 80 former Catholic priests released a letter in opposition to the

amendment.

About 70 miles away, three days later, 30 people -- Catholics and others -- in the St. Cloud diocese held a rally in front of the St. Cloud diocesan office, opposing the amendment, according to a *St. Cloud Times* story.

A June 5 poll by the Democratic-leaning Public Policy Polling shows 49 percent of Minnesota voters opposing the amendment and 43 percent supporting it, a change since its last poll in January, where 48 percent of voters supported the amendment and 44 opposed it. However, other polls have shown a near even divide among voters.

Minnesota?s Supreme Court was one of the first courts in the country to rule on same-sex marriage, according to the Minnesota Legislative Reference Library website. In 1971, the court held that Minnesota statutes prohibited marriages between same-sex partners. In 1997, a law similar to the Defense of Marriage Act passed the legislature and it explicitly prohibited same-sex marriage.

Constitutional amendments in Minnesota on the issue of same-sex marriage and traditional marriage have been debated since 2004.

Gay marriage is legal in New York, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Washington, D.C. Maryland legalized gay marriage this year as well, but that state is also poised to have a public vote this fall.

[*NCR* West Coast correspondent Dan Morris-Young contributed to this report.]

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