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Catholics split on proposed gay Boy Scouts change

by Aaron Schrank by Religion News Service

Paul Sefranek is a lifelong Roman Catholic and a long-serving volunteer in the Boy Scouts of America ? two parts of his identity that have always been in harmony.

Until now.

As the BSA decides this month whether to allow openly gay boys into its program, Sefranek is among those who say the controversial move would cause him to quit the venerable Scouting program.

Sefranek, a former Scoutmaster who currently serves on his local Catholic Committee on Scouting in Peoria, Ill., recently submitted a contingent letter of resignation that will go into effect if and when the Boy Scouts adopt the new proposal.

?Under the proposed policy change, one cannot remain a faithful Catholic and serve as a Catholic BSA leader,? Sefranek said. ?The proposed change will only lead to confusing boys as to who they really are.?

The proposal, which would allow gay Scouts but continue to exclude gay adults as leaders, has the unanimous support of Boy Scouts? top officials, and will be voted on by the group?s 1,400-member national council on May 23.

But lower in the scouting ranks, dissension abounds ? particularly among faith-based groups that sponsor more than 70 percent of Boy Scout troops in the country.

Already suffering a long-term membership decline, the Scouts' proposal is an effort to appeal to younger parents who increasingly support gay rights. But the current two-pronged ban has strong support among existing members and volunteers, many of whom believe accepting gay members will clash with their religious convictions.

The Boy Scouts' leadership said it considered input from faith-based groups when shaping its policy.

"We believe that this policy remains true to the virtues, the core principles of scouting, not of any one religion, but of Scouting," said BSA executive committee member Nathan Rosenberg, in a webcast urging support for the plan.

Leaders from the Scouts' largest faith-based sponsoring organization — the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — have said they will accept the new policy if it is implemented.

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But the Scout's second- and third-largest sponsors — the United Methodist Church and the Roman Catholic Church — have stayed on the sidelines in recent months.

At St. Raymond of Penafort Catholic Church in Springfield, Va., the Rev. John De Celles announced in his church bulletin that the parish troop would end its relationship with the Boy Scouts if membership standards change.

"The new policy, if approved in May, would be a statement that 'gay is okay,' and would severely limit (if not completely prohibit) chartering organizations, like St. Raymond's, from passing on its moral teachings about same-sex attraction and homosexuals," De Celles wrote.

As many as a quarter of the 273,000 Boy Scouts connected to Catholic-run troops could leave, some leaders estimate. Still, many Catholic parishes welcome the move to allow openly gay scouts into their troops.

"If it changes, that's fine with us. In fact, I'm hoping they do change it," said Monsignor Donald Romito of St. John Neumann Catholic Church in Irvine, Calif. "We're welcoming to everybody, and everybody's welcome to join the Scouts. It wouldn't impact our relationship with the troop at all."

Views of homosexual behavior among Catholics are wide-ranging. A majority — 54 percent — of U.S. Catholics support gay marriage, compared to 47 percent of all Americans, according to a recent Quinnipiac University poll. But Catholic Church teaching calls same-sex attraction "an objective disorder" and condemns homosexual activity as immoral, though it also calls on Catholics to welcome and respect gays and lesbians in their faith communities.

So far, the group dedicated to preserving the church's relationship with the Boy Scouts — the National Catholic Committee on Scouting — has been vague in its public statements regarding the proposed membership policy.

Other faith-based groups have been much more aggressive in their positions. On May 5, the Washington-based Family Research Council hosted a "Stand With Scouts Sunday" webcast, calling for the preservation of the gay Scout ban. The event, which included a cameo by Texas Gov. Rick Perry, was simulcast at churches around the country.

At St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Richmond, Va., the Rev. Robert Novokowsky watched the program alongside his parish's troop leaders.

"The proposed changes are such that they will lead inevitably not only to acceptance of open homosexuality but also the tacit approval of that sinful lifestyle," Novokowsky said. "That's where compassion must draw a line. We cannot promote something we've defined as a sin."

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