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Catholic leaders urge support for Boy Scouts after shift on gays

by David Gibson by Religion News Service

The U.S. Catholic church's top liaison to the Boy Scouts of America is telling Catholic Scout leaders and troop sponsors that the BSA's new policy welcoming gay Scouts "is not in conflict with Catholic teaching" and they should continue to support scouting programs.

"Scouting is still the best youth-serving program available to all youth," Edward Martin, chairman of the National Catholic Committee on Scouting, wrote in a May 29 letter addressed to "fellow Catholic Scouters."

"We should be encouraged that the change in BSA's youth membership standard is not in conflict with Catholic teaching," Martin said, asking that "Catholic Scouters and chartered organization heads not rush to judgment."

Martin said that despite some concerns, the NCCS had taken a neutral stance on a resolution adopted on May 23 by the BSA's National Council.

In balloting that was seen as a potential watershed in the culture wars, more than 60 percent of the 1,400 members of the BSA council voted to allow gay Scouts while still barring gay men from being Scout leaders. The policy change takes effect Jan. 1.

Martin said in the week following the vote, he and his colleagues consulted with the BSA, with other faith-based Scouting groups and with Catholic experts, and weighed feedback on social media before declaring themselves satisfied that the new policy would not conflict with Catholic teaching.

One of the experts Martin cited was Edward Peters, a canon lawyer popular with church conservatives

who wrote that while he disliked the new policy it was not contrary to church doctrine.

Martin noted that Scouting policies still bar sexual activity of any kind, and that the Boy Scouts are still a religiously oriented group that prohibits members from promoting "any social or political position or agenda." He also noted that many young Catholics themselves do not want to leave the Boy Scouts.

Martin's comments will come as a relief to the BSA because religious organizations make up 70 percent of its sponsoring organizations, and many fear the new policy could split American scouting. The Roman Catholic church, which is the BSA's third-largest sponsor, accounts for about 10 percent of the national total of 2.6 million Scouts. Mormons are the top sponsors, followed by United Methodists.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints -- the Mormons -- has already signaled it does not object to the new policy, and United Methodist Scouting officials said they would continue to support the BSA. On the other side, Southern Baptists and other evangelical and conservative Christian groups have raised strong objections to the move and some have said they will explore alternatives to the Boy Scouts.

Martin's letter may also be important in heading off a potential split within the Catholic church over the new BSA policy.

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Following the vote, a number of Catholics said the church should sever its ties with the BSA and launch alternative scouting groups. The Sunday after the BSA decision, Fr. Derek Lappe of Our Lady Star of the Sea in Bremerton, Wash., announced that he was closing the parish's scouting program in a lengthy broadside that called gays "loser men" and listed widely discredited reasons why some men are gay.

But most Catholics appear to be supportive of the move, and church leaders seem willing to find an accommodation given that Scouting is such a popular way of keeping boys connected to church.

Bishop Robert Guglielmone of Charleston, S.C., who is the hierarchy's official adviser to the NCCS, attended the May 23 meeting of the BSA and said afterward while he was "not particularly encouraged" by the vote, "we can live with it."

Since most boys are going to stay no matter what happens, Guglielmone told the *National Catholic Register*, "We have a real obligation to stay in dialogue and to stay connected to the program."

But he warned the BSA that "if it gets to the point where some of our basic issues are threatened -- such as being able to pick leaders for Catholic chartered groups or in diminishing the role of religion and God -- then we will have to re-evaluate our participation in the program at that time."

Each bishop can decide whether the new membership policy is acceptable. Guglielmone has written to every U.S. bishop, and Martin said the NCCS would develop a plan to ensure "a consistent message is delivered to dioceses, parishes, Catholic Scouters and the media" on the church's views about allowing gay Scouts.

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