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For bishops, gay marriage fight moves to states

Thomas Reese | Jun. 27, 2013 NCR Today

The U.S. Supreme Court's decisions on gay marriage mean the political battle over gay marriage will move to the states. This will have significant consequences on the role of the Catholic bishops in the fight. Leadership on the issue will move from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops to the many state conferences of Catholic bishops.

Until recently, the leading voices and strategist for the bishops on gay marriage have been Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the president of the USCCB, and Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco, chair of the U.S. bishops' Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage, with assists from leading prelates like Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore and Cardinal Francis George of Chicago.

People will continue to hear from these prelates, but over time, their views will become irrelevant as decisions on strategy and tactics move to the state level. It is the bishops of a state who will decide how much money and effort they want to devote to the marriage debate in their states.

Bishops in states that have legalized gay marriage may conclude that it is politically impossible to reverse the decision in their states and therefore admit defeat and move on.

Bishops in red states where gay marriage is not legal may judge the fight worth making because with other allies, they have a good chance of maintaining the status quo.

The tough call will be for bishops in blue states, where polls show growing support for gay marriage. Here they must choose between fighting gay marriage or negotiating exemptions for the church as a price for their silence. No bishop wants to talk publicly about this on the national level, but in the back rooms of state legislatures, this may be the best deal that the bishops can get.

In these backrooms, the views of Dolan, Cordileone, Lori and George count for little. The state bishops will have to make the tough prudential choices that they judge best for their dioceses.

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