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French court: No conscience clause for mayors in same-sex marriage

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French Catholics criticized a Constitutional Court judgment denying local officials the right to opt out of conducting same-sex marriages. Antoine Renard, president of France's National Federation of Catholic Family Associations, charged that the court was operating under political pressure in issuing its decision.

"This ruling could have dramatic consequences for religious freedom both here and abroad," he said. "It also suggests the French Constitution is old-fashioned and needs verification."

Renard's comments came as representatives of 20,000 French mayors prepared a series of appeals against the court's Oct. 18 judgment that, in effect, rejected calls for a conscience clause to be added to France's same-sex marriage law.

The judgment was condemned as "liberty-killing" by the Catholic head of La Manif Pour Tous, a nationwide organization leading opposition to the law. Its leader, Ludovine de la Rochere, urged French citizens to back legal action in support of the mayors.

"This is a very serious infringement on a freedom fundamental for mankind -- to act according to conscience," said de la Rochere, a former spokeswoman for the French bishops' conference.

"We'll press for recognition that a child has a right to a father and mother and a mayor to freedom of conscience. Nothing can stand in the way of justice and liberty," she said.

Vincent Fauvel, press officer for the French bishops' conference, told Catholic News Service on Wednesday the bishops had "taken no position" on the court's ruling.

Renard accused the court of succumbing to "political influence" by failing to "consider the constitution's spirit."

He added that freedom of conscience was enshrined in the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international documents, and said Catholic campaigners counted on church members around Europe to help resist a "serious trend against religious freedom."

"Unfortunately, our bishops have concluded that their statements are no longer considered in the public debate," Renard said. "Although they won't speak out themselves, they're expecting lay organizations like ours to be visible and take action."

Meanwhile, an association of French mayors supporting conscience protections petitioned France's Constitutional Council for the right to opt out of same-sex marriage ceremonies. The organization accused French President Francois Hollande of reneging on a 2012 promise to insert a conscience clause in to the country's same-sex marriage law.

However, the court said it was not unconstitutional for public officials to be required to officiate at same-sex

marriages regardless of their personal objections.

The mayors' spokesman, Franck Meyer, deplored the "incomprehensible decision," and said mayors were elected for their "political and ethical views."

He added that the mayors would take their case to France's Council of State and the European Court of Human Rights.

In a June 13 advisory, French Interior Minister Manuel Valls warned the mayors that they faced five years in jail and a $103,000 fine for refusing to conduct same-sex marriages.

In an October survey by YouGov, an international Internet-based market research firm, 57 percent of French citizens said they opposed a conscience clause for mayors while 33 percent supported it.

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