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Bishop tries exorcism as Illinois legalizes same-sex marriage

Brian Roewe | Dec. 6, 2013

The mid-November passage of same-sex marriage legislation in Illinois had supporters celebrating equality, while one of the state's Catholic prelates warned of devilish intervention.

As Gov. Pat Quinn signed the marriage equality legislation in Chicago Nov. 20, Bishop Thomas Paprocki* of Springfield remained in the capital, leading a special holy hour of prayers of "supplication and exorcism in reparation for the sin of same-sex marriage" in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception.

"Our prayer service today and my words are not meant to demonize anyone, but are intended to call attention to the diabolical influences of the devil that have penetrated our culture, both in the state and in the church," Paprocki said in his homily to nearly 500 people in attendance.

He explained that because same-sex marriage violated God's plan -- citing Mathew 19 -- gay couples who wed "are culpable of serious sin," and politicians responsible for the law's passage "are morally complicit as cooperators in facilitating this grave sin."

"We must pray for forgiveness of these sins and deliverance from this evil which has penetrated our state and our church," he said, while also reiterating the need to affirm the church's teaching that homosexual persons should be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity.

Early in the homily, Paprocki said he was reluctant to conduct the prayer service. Opposition to it was fierce; one group collected 15,000 signatures in five days urging him to cancel the service, saying the bishop "is embarrassing the church with a pointless political stunt."

"I did not seek to enter any controversy and I don't relish being part of one. But I have given this matter a great deal of thought and prayer, which has led me to the conviction that God is calling me to speak out and conduct these prayers," Paprocki said.

"It is not hateful to say that an immoral action is sinful. On the contrary, the most compassionate thing we can do is help people to turn away from sin. To ignore another person's wrongful actions is a sign of apathy or indifference, while fraternal correction is motivated by love for that person's well-being, as can be seen by the fact that our Lord Jesus himself urged such correction," he said.

He frequently referenced Pope Francis, including his description, while Buenos Aires Archbishop Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, of Argentina's passage of a same-sex marriage law in 2010 as a " 'move' of the father of lies."

While Hollywood has focused on the devil's influence by diabolical possession, Paprocki said, the devil is present in more ordinary, subtle ways. With regard to same-sex marriage, he said, the devil's presence appears by:

- Deception, where it confuses God's plan for families;

- Division, "in the way our society, our families and our friendships have become so divided and polarized over this issue";
- Diversion, "in the fact that so much of our time, energy and resources are being spent in addressing this issue";
- Discouragement, "apparent in the message being conveyed to defenders of traditional marriage that the universal redefinition of marriage is unstoppable, so we might as well just stop trying."

"I'm not saying that anyone involved in the redefinition of marriage is possessed by the devil, which, if that were the case, would require the remedy of a 'major exorcism,' " he explained, "but all of us are certainly subject to the devil's evil influences and in need of protection and deliverance from evil."

The Illinois Legislature passed the bill in both houses Nov. 5, after an earlier attempt in February died in the House. It became the 16th state to legalize same-sex marriage, and the 10th state to do so in the past year. The law goes into effect June 1, 2014.

Response to the service fell along predictable lines. One letter writer to the Springfield newspaper said she disagreed with Paprocki's use of the world "evil."

"I have taught my children, as I was taught, that the word 'evil' better describes bigotry, hatred and prejudice, which Bishop Paprocki is clearly displaying in his words to the public. I feel that this behavior is a poor representation of the church and should not be tolerated," she wrote.

But Paprocki's objections to the law were not isolated. Fellow Illinois bishops issued statements and had letters read at Masses, while on the national scene, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops decried the new law.

"Marriage redefinition is a serious injustice," said San Francisco Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone, chairman of the U.S. bishops' Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage. "The law exists to safeguard the common good and protect authentic rights, especially the right of children to have a married mother and father."

Cordileone also criticized politicians who claimed Francis eased the church's position on same-sex marriage when he said, "Who am I to judge?" when asked in July about homosexuality.

**An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified Paprocki.*

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