

October 2, 2009

Dear Bishop Malone,

I am writing to register my objection to the DVD sermon you distributed to the parishes last weekend.

I am a Catholic at Sacred Heart in Hallowell. I have met you once or twice in the past, and love your enthusiasm and your energy. I also think you did an excellent job reorganizing the parishes, and helping priests deal with their overwork burden.

But on this issue, I have disagreed with you from the beginning. That in itself is not a problem to me. This is a big issue, involving a historic change in family relationships, and I understand why you and many of my friends are cautious. What is a problem for me, however, is the heavy-handed tactics you are increasingly employing on behalf of your point of view. This is not helpful to the Catholic Church in Maine, and the cause of evangelization, which I know is close to your heart. It is hurtful to Catholics like me, who feel you are twisting our arms because we are following our consciences. And it is divisive within parish life, causing some parishioners to see others as disloyal.

The DVD sermon was the last straw, and has caused me to send this public letter to you. Here is what I objected to about the DVD:

- 1. I did not like having a political advertisement inserted into Sunday Mass.** You have crossed many lines in your campaign to overturn the gay rights law: gathering signatures for a political referendum outside of church, putting political inserts in the weekly bulletin, having special collections for a political campaign. But requiring priests to show a political campaign ad right in the middle of Mass, in place of a sermon, is something I have never experienced before, and hope I never experience again.

I know something about political ads. I've written them for many candidates. They have logos and tag lines at the beginning and end, they have disciplined messages that follow the latest polling, they simplify complex issues in the interest of evoking emotions in the voters such as fear or hope. Your DVD had all of these characteristics.

I have nothing against political ads on television. I do object to political ads at Mass. Political rhetoric and prayers don't mix. I would feel the same way even if the political issue was a \$100 million bond issue to carry out the Beatitudes.

2. I object to your repeating of inaccurate statements. This is an inevitable outcome of using political speech in a Mass. Facts are distorted, slogans replace reason. You made several statements that were factually wrong and misleading.

For example, the statement that the gay marriage law will unleash a torrent of lawsuits is wrong. There is no evidence of this from other states. The issue that you raise, a lawsuit compelling a photographer to provide services for a gay wedding, is a real one, but it has nothing to do with the gay marriage law. It has to do with gay rights, and how the gay rights law is written, and what exemptions it has. I am not an expert on Maine's gay rights law, so I can't say whether or not the photographer would be affected. I can say, however, that repealing or not repealing the gay marriage law would have no effect on the situation. It's an issue with a different law, the gay rights law, on which you chose not to take a stand.

Likewise, the issue of the "king and king" book, and sex education of young students, is a red herring. The gay marriage law says nothing about schools. Maine's education laws are silent on the subject of marriage education. All decisions about sex and marriage education are the domain of local school boards, elected by parents and community members. This was true before the gay marriage law, and will remain true whether or not the gay marriage law is repealed.

It may be that some schools in Maine are already using the types of materials you refer to. It wouldn't surprise me. Now that many classrooms in Maine have children of same-sex parents, educators and school board members need to consider how to teach children to be welcoming and tolerant of others from different backgrounds, without compromising their own moral values. I don't have answers to this issue; all I know is that the issue was with us before the gay marriage law passed, and will be with us in the future whether or not the gay marriage law is repealed.

It embarrasses me to see my Bishop repeating misleading statements. They are not even central to your argument. They are only in your DVD because some pollster said that these arguments worked better than plain talk. And it embarrasses me to think of my Bishop consulting on the topic of his sermon with a pollster.

3. I object to your calling your position a "doctrine" that it is a "duty" for all Catholics to endorse. In your closing statement, you call opposition to gay marriage a "church doctrine" that it is our "duty" in faith to believe and vote upon.

I have always understood essential church doctrines to be those things that are in our creeds, or proclaimed by classic ecumenical councils, or proclaimed by a pope “ex cathedra.” Opposition to gay marriage meets none of these tests.

I take the hierarchy’s moral guidance and statements seriously. The Pope and bishops have important things to say on questions like the death penalty and health insurance and nuclear disarmament and abortion laws and family life. But such statements are not “church doctrine.” Catholics have an obligation to listen, to reflect, to pray, to consult their consciences, and to do what I think is right.

Sometimes in history, bishops and popes have given moral guidance that has turned out to be wrong. We no longer believe it is a mortal sin to take out a bank loan, or that Jews should be required to convert, or that we should conduct a Crusade against Moslems, or we should burn heretics. On balance, over the long haul, the bishops and popes have been right far more often than they have been wrong, in my opinion – which is why I am a Catholic. But that doesn’t take away the obligation of individual Catholics to think. I think of the words of Cardinal John Henry Newman -- “If I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts... I shall drink to the Pope, if you please -- still, to conscience first, and the Pope afterwards.”

Your conclusion to the DVD, that it is the obligation and duty of Catholics to do as you say in this matter, came across to me as bullying. It insinuates that those who happen to disagree with you are not loyal Catholics. This is not true. And it is hurtful to even have it implied.

So much for the DVD. Now let me look forward. Here is the political reality. Come November, a major portion of the Catholic voters in Maine will vote on the opposite side of you. Will it be quarter? Will it be third? Will it be half? I don’t know. I do know that I will be among them.

The question for me is whether you will conduct yourself in a way in the coming month that allows Catholics – and all Maine citizens -- to talk with each other intelligently about this issue, to treat each other with respect, to inhabit a space all where all feel welcome. Or whether you act in ways that foster an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and recrimination.

You have the capability of being a uniting and inspiring force. I pray that you find God’s help to do so.

Frank O’Hara
Hallowell, Maine