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GUEST COLUMN

Standing up to church leadership

By Linda L. Nelson

I was baptized, raised and confirmed a Catholic, and to this day, despite a wide range of experience with other world faiths, including a deep engagement with Buddhism, the Catholic liturgy and Mass are the spiritual practice I consider my own.

I've had to make peace with contradictions between the actions of the church hierarchy and my faith, my spiritual and my political beliefs for most of my life, from the church's historical atrocities to its modern strictures against ordaining women. The majority of my friends and family long ago gave up this moral wrestling. And while I have deep respect for individuals' personal moral choices, I have no tolerance for religious organizations such as the Catholic Church using their pulpits and funds to impose such choices on others in our secular democracy — particularly when the results seek to restrict and-or discriminate against the human rights of others.

I have been “married” to my partner, Judith Jerome, for more than 10 years — in the eyes of our loving god, our families, friends, colleagues and communities. Under Maine law, we are registered as domestic partners. Yet because the concept and term “marriage” are so intricately woven into the state and federal legal structures, which confer rights and benefits upon couples, the creation of domestic partner and civil union laws is not enough to ensure our equal rights with heterosexual couples. The law must be changed to allow us to marry.

Legislation passed last spring by our elected Maine Legislature, and signed by our governor, makes this change, lifting years of discrimination against gay people. At the same time, the legislation is precise, as it should be, in not forcing the Catholic Church or any other religious denomination to conduct such marriages if they do not wish to.

Yet last Sunday, at St. Mary's Star of the Sea in Stonington where I am warmly accepted as a member by my fellow congregants, I had to prematurely leave the service when the priest began urging the assembled to attend a rally in Augusta the next weekend to “defend” marriage against this pending legislation. Once home, I learned from the news that the Maine diocese is holding a second collection in Masses statewide this Sunday to help fund the political effort to veto this legislation. Lobbying from the pulpit around a specific piece of legislation at best breaks the guidelines of the church's federal tax-exempt status; and at worst crosses the important and fragile line between spiritual ministry and political organizing.

For many of us, the intersection of our faith, freedom of speech and engaged citizenship can be much like a confluence of rivers, ever moving, and we count on our spiritual leaders' sensitivity to this. As with previous issues, the political fight over the definition of "marriage" makes obvious moral contradictions between the spiritual tenets of Christianity and the worldly actions of many of its churches.

As a Catholic — who was brought up to believe in and to act upon "love thy neighbor as thyself" as the primary moral rule — I find these actions by the Maine church hierarchy, in opposition to my basic human right to be treated equally in love, to be heartbreaking. Participating in my Catholic heritage is always challenging, and such actions make it impossible for me to be at home in my own church.

As a citizen, I am outraged by the muscle the Maine diocese has opted to exercise in the political realm. To my fellow Catholics whom I love, and who I know love me: Let the Church know this is not right. No matter what your personal beliefs, don't give to that second collection this weekend, and let your priests know you are affronted by their politicking from the pulpit. And if you are so inclined, watch for a new group forming in Maine, "Catholics for Marriage Equality."

As Jesus himself taught us, sometimes being the best Christian means standing up to church leadership. As history has repeatedly shown, they, like us, are only human, and therefore fallible.

And for the rest of us: Let's affirm that love and respect are our guiding principles, and be sure to keep our country moving toward equal rights for all by getting to the polls in November and voting NO on 1, which seeks to overturn the new Maine law allowing same-sex couples to marry. For information on how you can support this effort, go to www.protectmaineequality.org.

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