

Ballot proposals test nuances of church teachings

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"There's been a proliferation of hate groups and hate crimes in the Northwest, and this measure would add to that atmosphere," Castagna told the *Courier* in a phone interview.

Indeed, the Oct. 13 edition of *Village Voice* magazine reported that an African-American lesbian and a gay white man were burned to death in Salem, Ore., earlier this month when someone threw a Molotov cocktail into their house. Both victims had been active in organizing against Measure 9, and the man had been badly beaten by an anti-gay gang just two weeks before the fire bombing.

And Father Galluzzo pointed out that on the very weekend his church was attacked by pro-Measure 9 vandals, the parish had planned to read at all Masses the state Catholic conference's letter opposing Measure 9.

Measure 9 is one of a number of anti-homosexual legislative proposals on state and local ballots throughout the United States. This election year, such measures are challenging the Catholic Church's public policy on "gay rights" in new and difficult ways.

On the one hand, the Catholic Church teaches that homosexuality is an "objective disorder," and that homosexual behavior is sinful. Indeed, the OCC has stated that although gays and lesbians "must be recognized as fellow citizens," the church does not "accept homosexual behavior as morally licit."

On the other hand, the church has repeatedly pointed out in its statements that there is nothing sinful in being homosexual, and that homosexuals are worthy of the same rights in housing and employment accorded the heterosexuals who make up the majority of the nation's population.

By taking such a position regarding homosexuality, the church often finds itself on both sides of the national debate regarding gay rights.

Explicit anti-gay measures generally have found no favor with the church's bishops in recent decades. But rarely does the church publicly support measures that explicitly protect gays and that extend to them such privileges as rights to adoption and marriage.

In San Francisco last year, for example, the archdiocese unsuccessfully pushed for the repeal of a domestic-partner rights ordinance that permits registration of homosexual or unmarried couples.

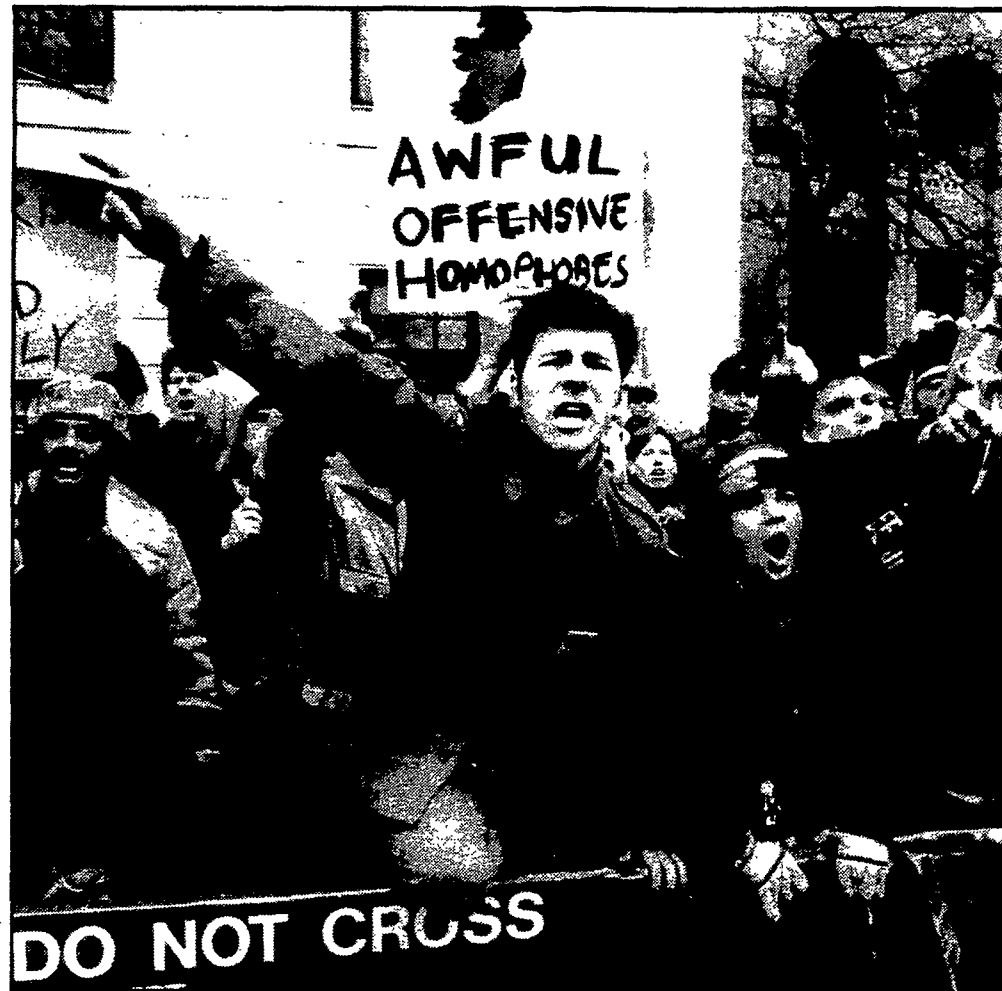
"We felt that that denigrated the state of marriage and therefore undermined the family," Deacon William Mitchell, spokesman for the San Francisco archdiocese, said in a phone interview with the *Courier*.

But the church sometimes avoids taking an explicit stand either for or against gay rights or anti-gay measures. Such a neutral stance can be rooted in the language of legislation concerning homosexuality, observers commented.

Take, for example, the language found in a state constitutional amendment Colorado voters are weighing this year. The amendment would prohibit the state and its subdivisions from the following:

"(A) adopting or enforcing any law or policy which provides that homosexual, lesbian or bisexual orientation, conduct or relationships constitutes or entitles a person to claim any minority or protected status, quota preferences or discrimination."

Because the amendment's language fails to distinguish — as the church does — between a person's sexual orientation and his or her behavior, the Colorado bishops declined to take a



Gay activists protest the exclusion of homosexuals from the St. Patrick's Day parade in New York City March 17, 1992, as parade dignitaries file past. Reuters/Bettman

stance regarding the amendment.

Doug Delaney, executive director of the Colorado Catholic Conference, noted in a phone interview with the *Courier* that the church's neutrality on the issue has earned it few friends on either side of the question.

"One of the blessings of the Catholic Church is that we have such a broad-based membership," Delaney said. "But at the same time, it brings a lot of broad-based criticism."

Delaney explained that he has been besieged by callers literally alternating between decrying church hypocrisy and chastising its timidity.

Because gays number among the church's clergy and religious, pro-gay callers believe the conference should oppose the amendment, he said. Anti-gay callers, however, deride the conference for missing an "opportunity" to publicly enhance Catholic moral teachings against homosexual behavior.

The Diocese of Portland, Maine, faces a similar dilemma this year because citizens have petitioned for the repeal of a 1991 ordinance that specifically outlawed discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, housing, access to public accommodations and extension of credit.

The ordinance was passed in the wake of violent attacks against gays in the city, a fact acknowledged in the language of the ordinance itself.

Echoing the Colorado bishops' neutrality on their state's proposed constitutional amendment, the Diocese of Portland has declined either to support or to oppose the repeal effort, according to Father Michael J. Henchal, diocesan co-chancellor.

Like the proposed amendment to Colorado's constitution, the Portland ordinance does not clearly distinguish between homosexual behavior and homosexual orientation, Father Henchal told the *Courier*. The lack of such a distinction could create difficulties for an institution seeking to promote traditional sexual morality, he said.

As an example, the co-chancellor put forth a hypothetical case in which a private school promoting heterosexual marriage employed a teacher who was publicly carrying on an affair with an

unmarried school secretary. He said such a situation could lead to the firing of one or both employees — not because they were heterosexuals, but because their behavior conflicted with the values upheld by the school.

But under the city's ordinance, Father Henchal said, if the same two employees were gay, they might be able to sue the school for discrimination. Hence, the priest continued, the ordinance leads one to ask where gays' rights to lead their own lives end, and where institutions' rights to promote their version of morality begin.

"No one seems to know the answer to that," he concluded. "And we won't know until the courts interpret it."

The difficulties church leaders have encountered in wrestling with civic laws that collide with church moral teachings prompted the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to issue an advisory letter this summer to bishops throughout the world.

While upholding homosexuals' rights to employment and housing, the letter also stated that "it is not unjust to take sexual orientation into account" particularly in the areas of adoption, foster care, military recruitment and in the hiring of teachers and coaches.

When leaked to the press by New Ways Ministry — a Catholic gay organization with no official ties to the church — the letter sparked a firestorm of controversy.

Gay-rights activists condemned the letter as an inflammatory statement that would only arm the nation's gay-bashers.

Furthermore, critics argued, instead of supporting gays' efforts to assert their sexual identities, the letter would only encourage them to keep their orientations' secret to avoid making waves with their employers. Critics of the letter argue that such reasoning by heterosexual society has led to destructive psychological consequences for gays.

On the other hand, many church leaders defended the letter's intent, stating that it was only intended for private reading by bishops. In addition, they noted that the letter was an advisory — not a mandate — for church leaders challenged by the complexity of a homosexual-rights movement that often directly contradicts church teachings.

In Oregon, two grass-roots organizations supporting Measure 9 — "Oregon's Catholics for Life" and "Catholic Oregonians for Truth" — have quoted from the Vatican document in their literature, according to Castagna. Neither group is officially tied to the church, he said, and the conference believes the groups have misinterpreted and misused the Vatican statement.

Other church officials concurred with Castagna's assessment that anti-gay groups have misused the Vatican's statements for their own ends. But such reasoning holds little water with those who challenge the church on this issue, including Richard Conheady, a member of the gay-ministry group at Rochester's Corpus Christi Parish.

Conheady called Castagna's claim that anti-gay groups misinterpreted the Vatican document as "sugarcoating it."

"To my reading, the church in no way would support in any way legislation protecting the rights of gay people," Conheady concluded.

Synod '92-93

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ods, the Synod Agenda Committee will eliminate any recommendations that conflict with Gospel teachings or are beyond the jurisdiction of the local church at this time, Father Hart said.

Among such recommendations are ones that would involve changing church law. These recommendations would be eliminated from the synodal process because they are beyond the power of the local church.

But the diocese will not disregard recommendations that are eliminated for this reason, Father Hart explained. Bishop Matthew H. Clark will use recommendations that fall outside the power of the synod or the diocese in addressing the broader church about "the needs and concerns of local church," the synod director remarked.

The remaining recommendations will be rewritten if necessary so that they offer practical, realistic guidance for the diocesan church in the coming years, Father Hart said.

In addition, Father Hart noted, parish synod teams are sharing the results

of the first three weeks of sessions with parish staff members and parish councils. Thus, the parish synods may help give parish ministers input on possible future directions for their own communities.

"What it's done is it's provided an opportunity to sit and look quite honestly at these areas and say, 'What can we as church do?' not what you as pastor can do or what can you as bishop do," Father Hart said.

The diocesan Synod Commission also plans to suggest that parishes set up parish task forces to look at the recommendations made by their own local synods and consider how these could be implemented at the parish level, Father Hart reported.

The regional synods in December will be followed in February and March of 1993 by a second and final series of parish synods. These sessions will focus on three remaining Synod themes: meeting the needs of youth, the elderly and those who care for the elderly; improving faith development; combatting racism, sexism, unemployment, poverty and lack of affordable housing and health care.