

Anti-Hillary Church Flier Called Work of Lay Catholic Group Ecclesia Militans

By Chris Stone

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A controversial church handout in Old Town claiming it's a mortal sin to vote for a Democrat was a response to a report that another pastor urged his flock to back Democrats.

That genesis was described Saturday outside the church by Larry Greenbank, a member of Ecclesia Militans, which he called a "loose collaborative group of faithful and informed Catholics."

Greenbank said that group of conservative lay people felt it was their obligation to counteract the "vote-Democratic" stance of an unspecified Roman Catholic pastor "in the north part of town."

The flier, distributed Oct. 16 in the bulletin of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church led by the Rev. Richard Perozich, drew an outside protest in front of the Old Town church before Saturday evening Mass.

The flier was followed by a political message in the Oct. 30 bulletin from Perozich on voting as a Catholic — implying Satan's influence on Hillary Clinton. The story, first appearing Nov. 2 in The San Diego Union-Tribune, went viral worldwide.

But the flier was distributed not only at the Old Town church, but also at several "select churches" in the diocese, Greenbank said.

In an email Sunday to Times of San Diego, Perozich said Ecclesia Militans was responsible for the flier inserted into his bulletin. Times obtained an earlier version of the flier — two pages instead of one and with two colors rather than one.

The flier's title was changed from "HOW TO VOTE LIKE A CATHOLIC — IT'S A SERIOUS SIN TO VOTE DEMOCRAT!" to the same with the phrase "MORTAL SIN."

Perozich confirmed that he wrote the article in the Oct. 30 bulletin, adding: "Our parish is pleased with the bulletin teaching. I am a pastor for this parish and will continue to lead it."

He said members of other Catholic parishes or nonreligious commenting on the issue "is an exercise of their free speech, the very exercise they are trying to deny me because it does not fit their agenda. I will continue to guide my flock to live out their faith in Jesus."

Holding a sign stating "Separation of Church and State," the Rev. Dermot P. Rodgers of St. Peter of Rome Parish in Allied Gardens stood with several people from his independent parish, which isn't connected with the Diocese of San Diego.

"I'm calling for him (the Rev. Perozich) to be removed from public ministry," Rodgers said.

"The [Catholic] Church can't choose one candidate over another and threaten people who vote their conscience under the pain of mortal sin," Rodgers said. "That's not the Catholic thing to do."

As he spoke, holding his sign, people walked by the church and asked why Rodgers and several women were protesting.

"It's not my job as a priest and it's not anyone's job as a priest to tell you who to vote for," he told them. "It's my job to teach you our religion."

Rodgers also objected to the church being used as a polling place because he thinks the church has been "tainted."

Responding last week to the flier incident, San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy said in a statement: "As a matter of policy and practice, the Catholic Church does not endorse specific candidates, use parish media or bulletins to favor candidates or parties or engage in partisan political activity of any kind. ... It is contrary to Catholic teaching to state that voting for a Democrat or Republican automatically condemns the voter to hell."

Pastor Perozich, insisting that his parish wasn't responsible for the flier, told Times of San Diego after Mass: "Those things weren't written by anyone here. We don't say that. Someone else put that in (the church bulletin) and we didn't authorize it." (On Sunday, Perozich said he was informed of the source of the flier after Saturday's Mass.)

"We don't condemn people to hell," Perozich said. "We tell people that these (issues such as abortion and homosexuality) are the important things to vote for because these are undermining us."

Asked if he thought it was a mortal sin for a Catholic to vote for a Democrat, Perozich repeated what he had said in the bulletin, paraphrasing Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI:

"If a Catholic votes for a candidate, knowing that the candidates promotes abortion and euthanasia and votes for them because of that, that Catholic cannot receive Holy Communion. If a Catholic votes for the candidate for other reasons it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons."

Greenbank of the group that distributed the flier said: "I told (the protesters) that they shouldn't be here because Father didn't have anything to do with the flier. No one in the parish had anything to do with the flier. We have [also] distributed that flier in a parish on the north side of town."

"I know who created it," he said outside the church Saturday night. "It was a collaborative effort by concerned Catholics — Catholics who are well-trained.

They know the teachings of the church."

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Greenbank continued: “Lay Catholics have a very important role in the political arena. We can speak freely, whereas the pastors cannot. Especially when we are in an election cycle, we have not only an essential role but also a responsibility to teach the truth.”

He said many conservative Catholics are concerned about what is happening, and “we have a unique situation in this diocese because the bishop [McElroy] is a progressive liberal.”

“That doesn’t mean he is wrong and that we want to cause problems, but lay Catholics still need to be able to communicate,” said Greenbank, a donor to former GOP Sen. Rick Santorum’s 2012 presidential bid.

“The free republic cannot survive without a common moral code and that ultimately comes from the Catholic Church,” he said. “That is the source of our Christian faith, so it is doubly essential that we teach the truth.”

Allyson Smith, a longtime essayist for conservative Catholic causes and right-wing websites such as WorldNet Daily and Americans for Truth about Homosexuality, also came to Immaculate Conception Church to support the pastor, whom she felt was being unjustly persecuted.

Smith, a parishioner from a church in El Cajon, said she has known the pastor for years and went to the church because she heard of the liberal priest’s planned protest.

“You have one candidate who is a member of a party that espouses intrinsic evils that no serious Catholic could ever vote in favor of or materially cooperate with,” Smith said.

“I appreciate Father [Perozich] speaking about this because I think at one point the Democratic Party was very pro-life and had laudable aspirations and goals, but over the last several decades has become an increasingly evil party, a party that openly espouses five moral evils such as abortion first and foremost, homosexual so-called marriage, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research and cloning,” said Smith, echoing items in the flier.

The Democratic Party stands for “these five evils that are non-negotiable in Catholic Church teaching, whereas the Republican Party platform supports everything that the Catholic Church supports,” she said.

Smith agreed that voting for a Democrat is a mortal sin.

“This is nothing more than perennial church teaching,” she said. “Was the flier somewhat inartfully worded? Very probably, or it wouldn’t have generated this reaction. But there was the reaction because people don’t hear these truths anymore.

“But in today’s society — where every man does what is right in his own eyes and doesn’t want to be bound to a moral code — to them it just drives them crazy,” she said.

As it turns out, the “five evils” list in the flier was copied without permission from a four-page voter’s guide by El Cajon-based Catholic Answers, according to San Diego native Keith Michael Estrada writing Friday in his Patheos.com blog.

Perozich, the Old Town pastor, is no stranger to controversy.

In 2009, shortly after Barack Obama became president, Perozich was pastor of St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Escondido.

Perozich wrote a 1,200-word essay reprinted by courageouspriest.com that said if special interest groups have their way, “the first 100 days will spell the end of days for the American nation as we have known it since 1776. Abominations will be forced on us by the new government.”

Several weeks later, San Diego Bishop Robert Brom “asked [the] outspoken Escondido priest to tone down his fierce criticism of the Obama Administration,” according to a blog post.

In September 2007, Perozich wrote of Catholics: “Our complacency has permitted pornography, homosexuality, adultery, divorce, fornication, social engineering of our children in schools.”

After Mass Saturday, Perozich tackled the role of conscience in decision-making that may depart from church teachings — something that also was controversial at the diocesan synod last weekend.

Some conservative Catholics said they felt confused about the church’s teachings in relation to conscience.

“It’s not just conscience,” Perozich said. “Conscience means with knowledge of what God has taught through the scriptures through the tradition of the church.”

Not everyone who gathered outside the church agreed with Perozich.

Some expressed outrage that a church leader should dictate how someone votes.

“To say if you vote for this candidate or that candidate, you will go to hell — you can’t do that,” said a male passer-by.

Barbara Steinman, a Jewish pedestrian observing the protest, said: “There’s racism and everything else with [Donald] Trump. He hates everybody. He’s going to have a third world war, and I’m scared to death and want to leave this country.” *Contributing editor Ken Stone helped prepare this report.*