

Religious conservatives ponder resistance to abortion, gay marriage: The Manhattan Declaration

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Facing what they consider “threats” from American culture, prominent Catholic, evangelical and Orthodox leaders are vowing unspecified civil disobedience against abortion, same-sex marriage and limits on religious liberty.

“We are Christians who have joined together across historic lines of ecclesial differences to affirm our right—and more importantly, to embrace our obligation—to speak and act in defense of these truths,” reads the seven-page “Manhattan Declaration.”

“We pledge to each other, and to our fellow believers, that no power on earth, be it cultural or political, will intimidate us into silence or acquiescence.”

More than a dozen Christian leaders—including Catholic bishops, officials of evangelical organizations and an Orthodox priest—endorsed the document November 20 at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. Organizers claimed a week later that more than 150,000 persons had signed the declaration posted online.

Archbishop Justin Rigali of Philadelphia cited increasing numbers of troubling developments that sparked the new approach, including doctors expected to perform or make referrals for abortions despite their own objections, acceptance of embryonic stem cell research and assisted suicide, and the risk of marriage being “redefined in its very essence.”

“If someone asks, ‘Why now? What is the urgency of a declaration of conscience by Eastern Orthodox, Protestant and Catholic leaders?’ we say we must speak now because justice, which is love in action, demands that we not remain silent in the face of these threats,” Rigali said.

Supporters said possible civil disobedience would be up to individuals but could include taking action to close facilities or paying fines.

The document was drafted by evangelical author-organizer Chuck Colson; Catholic lay leader Robert George, who teaches jurisprudence at Princeton University; and Timothy George, who teaches at Beeson Divinity School.

The declaration specifically states that initiatives to recognize same-sex marriage are not the “cause” of damage to the institution of marriage, which has been eroded by divorce and infidelity. “What we don’t want to do is lock in any understanding of marriage that will become itself an impediment to us rebuilding the marriage culture,” said Robert George.

Another signer, Ronald Sider, director of the traditionally progressive group Evangelicals for Social Action, said he viewed the document as “not partisan” and as embracing Christian values. “This is not a political ploy,” Sider said.

[The Christian Post, an online news service, reported that pastor-author John MacArthur of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, said the document falls “far short of identifying the one true and ultimate remedy for all of humanity’s moral ills: the gospel,” which he said is barely mentioned. MacArthur also criticized the declaration for downplaying evangelicals’ theological differences with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches.]

Americans United for Separation of Church and State questioned whether the motives of the declaration’s supporters were ultimately political.

“I am optimistic that the people in the pews will not heed their leaders’ misguided call to action,” said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United. “Polls show that most churchgoers do not want to see their faith politicized. But I am well aware that religious leaders have vast lobbying power that cannot be ignored.” *-Religion News Service*