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Headline News

Archbishop opposes circumcision ban

May 24th, 2011 By Valerie Schmalz

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San Francisco Archbishop George Niederauer called a proposed ban on circumcision that qualified for the Nov. 8 ballot in San Francisco "a misguided initiative" and "an unconscionable violation of the sanctuaries of faith and family" by the city.

The archbishop made his comments in a letter to the editor of The San Francisco Chronicle sent May 23 in support of an opinion article by Rabbi Gil Leeds published in the newspaper May 20, three days after the San Francisco Department of Elections validated the 7,743 signatures needed to qualify the initiative for the ballot.

The Jewish Community Relations Council, a Bay Area organization, is spearheading opposition and has formed The Committee for Parental Choice and Religious Freedom. An interfaith coalition that includes NAACP San Francisco President Rev. Amos Brown and University of San Francisco President Jesuit Father Stephen Privett also opposes the proposal as an infringement on religious liberty and parental rights.

The initiative would ban circumcision for any male under 18 except in cases of medical necessity. It says that religious belief could not be used as an exception to the law and violators could be fined up to \$1,000 and imprisoned for up to one year.

Circumcision is a religious rite in most forms of Judaism and in Islam as well as a choice of other parents for non-religious reasons including tradition and hygiene. In the United States it is most frequently performed by a doctor in a hospital shortly after birth.

"Parents don't have a right to harm their child. They can only do what is in the best interest of their child. I can guarantee a child being held down and having their genitals mutilated is not a religiously uplifting experience for the child," said Lloyd Schofield, the initiative's primary sponsor and part of a core committee of five working on the campaign.

Schofield, who details arguments for the ban on the website sfmgm.org, said men who want to undergo the procedure removing the penis' foreskin may do so after they turn 18.

Neither parental rights nor religious freedom is more important than stopping the practice, said Schofield. He said he was raised Lutheran but practices no religion and has no children.

"This is an unnecessary harmful surgery that is being forced on men when they are most vulnerable and defenseless," Schofield said. "Less than 3 percent of intact adult men choose to undergo the operation."

The Rev. James DeLange, a Lutheran pastor and chair of the San Francisco Interfaith Council, said in a statement that the ban "would turn back the clock on a right that is fundamental to the founding of this country - the right to the free exercise of religion."

"People of all religions, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds have sought a new life in San Francisco to pursue religious liberty," he said.

Abby Michelson Porth, associate director of the Jewish Community Relations Council and a leader of The Committee for Parental Choice and Religious Freedom, called the initiative an affront to religion and to religious liberty.

"Jews have performed circumcisions for 4,000 years. It is symbolic of our

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monotheism and our covenant with God," she said.

In his letter, Archbishop Niederauer stated: "Although the issue does not concern Christians directly, as a religious leader I can only view with alarm the prospect that this misguided initiative would make it illegal for Jews and Muslims who practice their religion to live in San Francisco – for that is what the passage of such a law would mean."

Further, the archbishop wrote, "Apart from the religious aspect, the citizens of San Francisco should be outraged at the prospect of city government dictating to parents in such a sensitive matter regarding the health and hygiene of their children."

USF President Father Privett called the measure a "totally unnecessary and thinly disguised expression of intolerance and discrimination against centuries-old religious traditions."

The ban would not only violate religious liberty but "we should not waste citizens' time and money," the NAACP's Rev. Brown wrote in a statement.

*From the May 27, 2011 issue of Catholic San Francisco.*

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