



In a political and legal battle that was to set Eileen Flockhart against the Catholic hierarchy, New Hampshire Attorney General Kelly Ayotte argued before the US Supreme Court in support of a state law requiring parental notification before a minor has an abortion.

BEGAN MY FIRST TERM AS A STATE Representative in New Hampshire in 2004 upon retiring as an educator after 36 years. I had run unsuccessfully two years earlier and had studied very carefully how to integrate my Catholic faith into the decisions I would be asked to make as a legislator. Now as the lone Democrat in my district, I approached my new position with enthusiasm and energy.

New Hampshire's House is a 400-member body and it was a bit overwhelming, but I soon became very involved in my Children and Family Law committee as well as other groups like our Legislative Caucus for Young Children. I began to sense that right-to-life/abortion issues were going to be very much a part of our legislative year. I was correct. In fact, in the nearly four years that I have served, there have been easily 40 to 50 bills introduced and dealt with that pertained to some aspect of abortion, parental notification or contraception.

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A Voice from the Front Line

A MEMBER OF THE NEW HAMPSHIRE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES REFLECTS ON HER BATTLES WITH THE CATHOLIC HIERARCHY

By Representative Eileen Flockhart

To say that I have my own thoughts on how the church should treat its members would be an understatement. My own formative years occurred during the tumultuous years around Vatican II, and I embraced the changes completely, as I do today. I still yearn for the openness and stimulating atmosphere of a welcoming church. I make no apologies for how I feel about my Roman Catholic faith. I have been disappointed and angered over the years by the church's lack of mercy and compassion in a world that so desperately needs it.

So now here I am a state legislator representing my district. In any given year we are presented with 800 to 1,000 bills that will move to committees to be acted upon before being voted on in the House.

In my first term, one of the controversial issues was a law that had been passed previously concerning parental notification prior to abortion. The Supreme Court in New Hampshire had immediately ruled it unconstitutional. There was a great deal of misinformation concerning the bill and the ruling. I was approached by a number of constituents and I did my best to educate and inform them about the problems that this bill had created. My pastor met me after church on a day when I was a lector and simply said, "You know how I feel on this issue." There was no dialogue or

interaction and I replied that I understood. We clearly did not agree.

Next came the issue of emergency contraception and the provision of it to victims of rape in the hospitals of New Hampshire. Our pastor spoke before the end of Mass about his and the church's objection to emergency contraception. He spoke directly to parishioners, saying that it was really another form of abortion. He encouraged parishioners to speak with their representatives. That Sunday I was verbally accosted by a member of my parish after Mass who certainly was not able to listen to reason and was only content in his abuse. Our assistant pastor, seeing the altercation, came to my rescue and gave me some space to recover. I developed a thicker skin and stood my ground on the issue. The bill passed successfully.

In early 2007, the realization that our bill to approve civil unions in New Hampshire would come to fruition with a new Democratic-controlled House and Senate gave so many hope. It was also inspiring to see the way that this issue was not really partisan at all; it was a question of fairness and very overdue equality. Members of our House spoke of their own relationships of 25 and 30 years that now would be validated with the passage of this bill.

Here the pressure on the bill came to committee members directly from

Manchester Bishop John B. McCormack's office. Representatives from the diocese spoke and letters were sent. The Judiciary Committee room was next to ours and we often would see the overflow crowd.

As that committee wrestled with these hearings, our Children and Family Law Committee was taking up another bill to clarify adoption procedures for unmarried couples in our state. This bill affected many gay and lesbian couples and their families. With some improved language, we could give greater legal security to already well-established families. Along with civil unions, it seemed so logical and the right thing to do. Once again the diocese weighed in, this time to our committee, and urged us to defeat this bill. However, it moved through the House and passed with a nearly two-to-one margin. Unfortunately, it was tabled in the Senate.

In the midst of these hearings and discussions I found myself—as a Catholic—not conflicted but rather disappointed. I have been a lector in my church for many years and have also taught religious education, sung in choirs and continue to work in our food pantry. I have listened to sermons at Mass that have inspired me and I have listened to sermons that have made me want to jump up and protest.

Shortly after the Civil Unions bill passed, I got a call from my pastor wanting to make an appointment with me. Being the eternal optimist, I thought this would be a great opportunity for some real dialogue on this and other issues. What was I thinking? After a few pleasantries, he got down to business. He said that he had had some complaints from parishioners and that in light of my votes in the House it was inappropriate for me to stand up as a lector. My public positions as a representative were inconsistent with Catholic teaching. He asked me to leave my ministry as a lector, effective immediately.

Initially I was furious, but as our discussion continued I decided that I could not

go without speaking my mind. The many, many ways that we as church exclude and do not welcome God's people is staggering to me. I could not imagine the God of my own faith being so heartless. I asked if we as a parish could have a discussion about some of these very topics that trouble us all. He said that he would pray about it and get back to me. He never did.

There were other things said during the course of this one-hour meeting that even now I have trouble recalling. The anger I felt was compounded by the feeling of betrayal.



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New Hampshire Bishop John B. McCormack, pictured here testifying during the trial of defrocked priest Paul Shanley in Cambridge, Massachusetts, directed a campaign against a civil union bill in the New Hampshire House of Representatives.

That was more than a year ago and each time I go to Mass I still feel the sting of that denial of my desire to serve. In its own strange way it has taught me just how flawed and human any organization can be and it has given me a glimpse of the pain of exclusion many Catholics deal with on a daily basis.

My own connection with Catholics for Choice and other groups like Voice of the Faithful and Dignity USA have provided remarkable insight and strength that my views are not unique and that those who dream of change in the church will truly make it happen.

I do believe that some of the strength I had to deal with this incident came from my experiences with Catholics for Choice.

I first attended a state legislators' conference in December 2005. The group attending had stories of similar affronts but many more egregious than mine. We were all people of strong faith and an intellectual understanding that we could differ on issues within our church yet still maintain the deep core of our beliefs. It was a tremendously empowering experience meeting and sharing insights with this group. I would have this opportunity twice more as well as an opportunity to expand the web of support to our own New Hampshire legislators.

Staff at Catholics for Choice and the Catholics in Public Life campaign helped us to coordinate introductions and a get-together of more Catholic legislators in Concord, New Hampshire.

Here again I heard more stories, often kept under wraps by strong but wounded Catholics. The difference now was that we knew each other better and could support each other should our positions come under attack. It is much more frightening to feel that you are alone as a Catholic legislator.

The shared faith and intellectual stimulation provided at those conferences, through publications, and shared with us on-site here in New Hampshire is the beginning of a stronger group of Catholic legislators. We can all dream that perhaps in all of this there will be a truly open legislative and diocesan dialogue as issues of faith and law collide.

As for my part, being a legislator and being Catholic have been both a joy and a challenge. I'm often asked after some of these disappointments why I continue to remain Catholic. I repeat again and again: "This is my church, it is part of who I am and it is far from perfect." My experience as a legislator has given me glimpses of hierarchical pressures but also strong convictions that my church will need to evolve and get involved in real discussion to remain relevant. I plan to find a way to be part of that discussion. ■