

Has Abortion Tide Reversed?

By
RELIGIOUS NEWS SERVICE

Are pro-life groups turning the tide against liberalized abortion in the U.S.?

To quote a leader in the movement to repeal restrictive abortion laws: "The fervor and tenacity of the right to life brigades have come very close to reversing the trend toward liberalized abortion laws in this country."

A News Analysis

And most recently, as if to emphasize the point, Pennsylvania's legislature approved a strict measure allowing abortion only to save the life of the mother. It was passed by the House, 127 to 50, and by the Senate, 39 to 9. But Gov. Milton Shapp termed the bill "unacceptable," and vetoed it Nov. 30.

The Pennsylvania bill was passed despite the fact that an all-woman Abortion Law Commission, appointed by Gov. Shapp to study the question, favored legalization of abortion.

Just a few weeks previous, two almost identical initiatives on the Nov. 7 ballot in Michigan and North Dakota calling for liberalized abortion laws in those states were voted down.

In North Dakota, where pro-life forces have a strong Lutheran composite, the bid to furnish abortion on demand within 20 weeks of pregnancy was countered with a 4 to 1 majority vote against the measure.

According to sources in Bismarck, the abortion campaign "never surfaced as a 'Catholic' issue," and the opposition to abortion is strongly ecumenical and only part of a "positive," political program on "life rights" to be presented to the state's legislature.

Michigan's voters, by an almost 2 to 1 margin, threw the whole question of liberalized abortion back into the hands of the state's Supreme Court, which has been pondering the 126-year-old restrictive abortion law.

In Michigan, more so than in North Dakota, the Roman Catholic leadership against abortion reform was in evidence. And Catholic elements, active throughout the state, were credited with being the major factor in the defeat of the proposition.

Just prior to the election, Cardinal John Dearden, acting on a suggestion from his Detroit archdiocesan Priests' Senate, called for a day of fasting and prayer "as a sacrificial offering to ask God's help and light . . ."

Another victory for pro-life forces was recorded in Missouri last October when the state's Supreme Court overturned a lower court decision and upheld the constitutionality of Missouri's 137-year-old abortion law, which allows abortion only to save the mother's life.

The 6 to 1 ruling held that the law is "not vague" as charged, and in the majority opinion it

was stated that, in light of a U.S. Supreme Court decision on capital punishment, the unborn child has a right to life at least equal to that of a convicted murderer.

As noted in the Missouri court opinion, the high court could significantly affect the decision, when and if it rules on cases in which the Texas and Georgia statutes on abortion are being challenged. The Missouri law is identical to the Texas law.

Just a few days before the Missouri decision was announced, the South Dakota Supreme Court unanimously ruled that the state's 83-year-old abortion law — similar to Missouri's — is constitutional.

While the court noted that the law "perhaps . . . reflects a puritanical view and should be repealed, amended or modified," it also observed that "its eventual resolution rests entirely with the legislative branch . . . subject only to constitutional restrictions."

The pro-life movement in the U.S. — while strongly influenced and manned by Catholics — does have considerable support from Protestant and Jewish elements. And in many cases, local and regional right to life committees are heavily interreligious.

Prior to the defeat of the Michigan and North Dakota abortion initiatives, U.S. Rep. Lawrence J. Hogan of Maryland — who is a Catholic — said there are "many signs" that a "new trend against legalized abortion is growing, particularly where the dreadful results of legalized abortion are becoming manifest . . . as in New York."

(More than two years ago, New York enacted a law allowing abortion on demand up to 24 weeks of pregnancy. A repeal

of the liberalized law was voted by the 1972 legislature, but vetoed by Gov. Rockefeller. In the first full year of the law, more than 260,000 abortions were performed in New York.)

Rep. Hogan added that since 1970 no "permissive abortion laws" have been enacted in any state, except Florida where a subsequent court decision left the state without any law on the matter.

During their recent meeting in Washington, D.C., the nation's Roman Catholic bishops cited the influence of a September pro-life campaign called "Respect for Life Week." The week was originally set up as a response to the report of the Presidential Commission on Population Growth and the American Future which advocated continuing liberalization of abortion laws.

Many Catholic bishops reported that respect life programs launched in their dioceses drew a solid response from individual non-Catholics and Protestant and Jewish organizations.

In Trenton, N.J., for example, Dr. Edwin Palmer, a Christian Reformed clergyman who heads New Jersey's Right to Life Committee, threw his organization's support to the Catholic bishops' respect life program. He noted that while major thrust focused on "sanctity of human life as an alternative to abortion," the program also dealt with peace, poverty, the aged, youth problems and the family.

While impending U.S. Supreme Court decisions may eventually reverse the reversal of trends, the pendulum of support in the nation seems to have swung, at least for the present, to the side of those "opting for life."

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