

# Catholic groups join NOW pro-choice rally

By Julie Asher  
NC News

WASHINGTON — Catholic nuns, lay people and college students were among hundreds of thousands who participated April 9 in the National Organization for Women's capitol march on behalf of continuing abortion rights.

The U.S. Capitol police and the District of Columbia police estimated the crowd at 300,000. It was the largest single demonstration in the nation's capital in recent years, surpassing the 250,000 who gathered in 1963 for the civil rights March on Washington. The biggest rally crowd ever recorded was 1 million for a protest against the Vietnam War.

As NOW marchers gathered on the Capitol Mall, abortion opponent Judie Brown of the American Life League held a press conference on Capitol Hill, calling the event "a march for death and economic destruction." Assembled also in Lafayette Park, near the White House, were about 100 pro-life demonstrators, including Joseph Scheidler, head of the Pro-Life Action League in Chicago.

Pro-choice marchers, led by NOW president Molly Yard, the Rev. Jesse Jackson and several Hollywood celebrities, including actresses Whoopi Goldberg, Cybill Shepherd and Marlo Thomas, jammed Constitution Avenue as they streamed toward the Capitol for a rally.

Many waved wire coat hangers as symbols of illegal abortion and shouted, "We won't go back."

NOW organizers said the turnout illustrated the fear among abortion rights groups — and the hope of abortion opponents — that the Supreme Court will use an upcoming case to limit abortion or overturn the *Roe vs. Wade* ruling that struck down state laws against abortion.

On April 26, the Supreme Court is scheduled to hear oral arguments in the case *Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services Inc.*, a dispute over a Missouri law scuttled by lower federal courts.

As a three-hour rally went on at the Capitol, right-to-lifers prayed silently nearby at a "Cemetery of the Innocents," consisting of 4,400 crosses placed by the American Coalition for Life at the Reflecting Pool to symbolize the number of abortions that take place each day.

Many in the NOW march wore white and purple, the colors of the suffragette movement at the turn of the century.

Among them was Loretto Sister Maureen Fiedler of Mt. Rainier, Md., who said she was there "to defend the moral adulthood of women."

Sister Fiedler carried a sign that read, "Tenderhearted nuns for choice," a reference to remarks made in March by Cardinal Edouard Gagnon, president of the Pontifical Council for the Family at a meeting of U.S. bishops and Vatican officials. The cardinal warned against diocesan marriage tribunals including women religious because, he said, "their tender hearts" may "play tricks on them."

"I believe abortion is a serious moral decision, a moral issue but the decision belongs with the woman," Sister Fiedler added.

Sister of St. Joseph Jacquie Wetherholt from Detroit said she was a longtime supporter of women's rights and "had no idea that there would be the shift to pro-choice, but I'm supportive of what is involved (for a woman) in a decision for an abortion."

Providence Sister Kathleen Desautels from St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Ind., said she also favored letting women make the choice themselves.

"Pro-choice is different than being pro-abortion. Abortion is not something anybody wants," she said. "It is always a need. The rich will always be able to have abortions, no matter what the law. The

poorer you are the less choice you have."

Laurie Quinn, a freshman at Jesuit-run Boston College, said she believes in "a woman's right to choose." Catherine Darsenbourg, a Catholic student at Worcester Polytech Institute in Massachusetts, said Catholics "are children of God" with "a right to choose for themselves."

Along the march route stood Bill Yates of Annandale, Va., who brought his two sons with him to protest abortion as a violation of civil rights, but he added the march showed the country's freedom of speech "at work ... It's beautiful in a way, as much as I disagree with them."

During the rally, Frances Kissling, head of Catholics for a Free Choice, an organization that opposes church teaching on abortion, said in an interview "that if the battle is won or lost on numbers, we're winning."

Despite her disagreement with church teaching on abortion, she said she would remain a Catholic. "I'd rather fight than switch," she added.

Catholic teaching against abortion was reaffirmed in 1974 in a Vatican declaration that said church tradition "has always held that human life must be protected and favored from the beginning" and that a "Christian can never conform to a law which is in itself immoral."

As marchers assembled on the Mall in the morning, the American Life League held a press conference on Capitol Hill.

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Approximately 300,000 people packed Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C., to demonstrate on behalf of the Equal Rights Amendment and the continued legality of abortion in the United States.



Religious groups, including Catholics For Choice and The National Center of Jewish Women, participated in the pro-choice march on Washington Sunday, April 9.

## Court to hear church views on abortion

By Liz Schevtchuk  
NC News

WASHINGTON — As the U.S. Supreme Court wrestles with its latest abortion case, both sides in the dispute are citing the views of early church fathers — people like St. Thomas Aquinas and St. John Chrysostom — to uphold their points of view.

On April 26, the Supreme Court is scheduled to hear oral arguments in the case, *Webster vs. Reproductive Health Services Inc.*, a dispute over a Missouri anti-abortion law scuttled by lower federal courts.

Pro-life groups hope — and abortion rights groups fear — that the high court will use the case to either seriously limit abortion or go even further and overrule the *Roe vs. Wade* ruling that legalized abortion nationwide in 1973.

Since one contested provision of the Missouri law was a declaration that life begins at conception, friend-of-the-court

briefs submitted by advocates on both sides explore — sometimes with different conclusions — the Christian understanding of the beginning of human "personhood" and the role of conscience in the abortion decision.

In a brief urging the court to strike down the Missouri law, the National Coalition of American Nuns and Catholics for a Free Choice stated that Catholic theologians have long been uncertain about the beginning of "personhood" and the exact time the soul begins to exist.

But their scholarship and opinions were attacked as "scandalous" by a spokesman for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops.

"The brief abounds in errors of fact and logic," said Richard Doerflinger, associate director for policy development of the NCCB Office for Pro-Life Activities. "In the final analysis, it is difficult to decide what is more scandalous: the brief's lack of appreciation for Catholic teaching or the

incoherence of its arguments."

Meanwhile, a brief filed by more than 40 bishops and other officials of the Orthodox Church cited early Christian leaders such as St. John Chrysostom and St. Basil in denouncing abortion and urging the high court to overturn *Roe vs. Wade*.

But another brief, this one signed by some individual Catholics and eight bishops of the Episcopal Church, among others, stated that an end to abortion would violate religious freedom and that Christian views on the morality of abortion differ drastically.

According to the National Coalition of American Nuns' brief, uncertainty about ensoulment or the beginning of personhood is important to the abortion issue because "possession of a soul is the characteristic that distinguishes persons from non-persons."

"There is no constant teaching in Catholic theology on the commencement of per-

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