

Vatican decries, court tests assisted suicide

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Medically assisted suicide was assailed at the Vatican in mid-February and tested in a Michigan courtroom, where a retired pathologist faces murder charges for helping two women kill themselves last year.

Meanwhile, in Quebec, "Nancy B.," the 25-year-old, paralyzed woman who fought and won a battle for the legal right to end her life, died Feb. 13, seven minutes after being disconnected from a respirator. Her death came a week after the end of a mandatory 30-day appeal period.

Nancy B. had asked the court to order her doctor and a Catholic hospital to unplug the respirator to end her life, which she said consisted of watching TV and thinking. She was paralyzed from the neck down with an extremely rare case of Guillain-Barre syndrome, a neurological disorder.

Canadian theologians had disagreed on whether it was morally correct to grant the young woman's wish.

Speaking Feb. 11 at a closed-door Vatican meeting of the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers, New York Cardinal John J. O'Connor said euthanasia and medically assisted suicides were gradually becoming a big business in the United States.

At the same meeting, Pope John Paul II said Catholic health-care workers and institutions hold a special place in the church's evangelization

efforts, bringing hope and healing to the sick.

Across the Atlantic, in a courtroom in Rochester Hills, Mich., the attorney for Jack Kevorkian, a retired Michigan pathologist, took what legal experts viewed as a major step toward winning an acquittal for his client on murder charges by casting doubt on who was responsible for two women's deaths last year.

During a heated cross-examination of Oakland County medical examiner L.J. Dragovic, defense attorney Geoffrey Fieger repeatedly asked how Dragovic determined that the deaths of Sherry Miller, 43, and Marjorie Wantz, 58, were homicides. Both women had been painfully but not terminally ill.

Dragovic said he based his determination on the fact the women were connected to devices made by Kevorkian which they could not have made by themselves.

Doctor-assisted suicide has drawn national attention since Kevorkian first used his suicide machine to help an

Oregon woman kill herself in 1990.

Ms. Miller died of carbon-monoxide poisoning after opening a valve on a canister of gas. Ms. Wantz died as a result of receiving a deadly dose of chemicals after pulling a string on the machine to start the flow of chemicals.

The trial is to determine whether Kevorkian, 63, should be handed over for trial on two counts of murder and one count of delivering a controlled substance. If found guilty of all three charges, he could spend the rest of his life in prison.

Fieger has said the women merely received help from Kevorkian in committing suicide. Michigan has no law against assisting in a suicide.

At the Vatican meeting, Cardinal O'Connor said that in the United States "the threat of euthanasia is on the verge of becoming as serious as that of abortion." He said many doctors "now make fortunes on death through abortion."

Such practices are a "perversion of the medical profession" and evidence

that "we are indeed developing a consistent ethic of death," he added.

Each year, 30 million to 40 million abortions are performed worldwide, he said.

Although euthanasia figures are unclear, "I predict that we will meet the same phenomenon of rapidly increasing numbers of human persons killed by some act or omission because of age, handicap or societal burden," he said.

The rise in abortion and euthanasia "shows a breakdown in the ethical responsibility of physicians" and reflects growing public opinion that does not consider them killings, he said.

Council president Cardinal Fiorenzo Angelini opened the Vatican meeting Feb. 10 by announcing that his office was drafting a code of professional conduct for Catholic health-care workers.

The pope praised the idea of a code of conduct as well as council efforts to start an international federation of Catholic health-care institutions.

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