

General counsel for U.S. bishops leaves ABA

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Mark Chopko, general counsel for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and its twin agency, the U.S. Catholic Conference, has dropped his membership in the American Bar Association because of its recent decision to back laws favoring abortion.

More than 1,500 lawyers have left the bar association over the issue.

"I find my continued membership incompatible with my own principles and strong beliefs," he wrote in a Sept. 8 letter to J. Michael McWilliams, president of the Chicago-based ABA. He said he made the decision not to renew his membership "with great regret and a strong sense of personal sadness."

The text of his letter was released in Washington.

During its annual convention in August, the ABA's House of Delegates by a 276-168 vote approved a resolution to oppose state and federal restrictions on abortion. The vote affirmed a 659-340 vote taken a day earlier of the general membership attending the convention.

The ABA rejected a similar effort in 1990 to endorse a right to abortion in favor of an official stance of neutrality.

Chopko said in his letter that he had worked "quite hard" for the ABA's policy on abortion neutrality and was "comfortable with that policy because neither side could claim that the organization was supporting his or her own political or moral viewpoint."

He said the ABA's reversal on its abortion stance was "both regrettable and erroneous" and added that the organization "staked itself to the most extreme position possible in the abortion debate in this society."

"As a commentator on constitutional abortion, I have concluded that *Roe vs. Wade* set the nation on an erroneous course," Chopko wrote. "It interrupted political processes already then occurring in the states. It judicially imposed a solution giving one side an absolute advantage over the other. Over the last 20 years the public policy debate through which the people, ultimately, decide important and controversial issues has been truncated."



Nearly 600 pro-life and pro-choice activists chanted at each other in front of a Planned Parenthood office in Houston Aug. 18. As the battle over abortion continues, more than 1,500 lawyers have left the American Bar Association over its recent decision to back laws favoring abortion.

The bar association's stand would require it, he said, "to oppose even moderate regulations" upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court earlier this year and to oppose parental notice and consent rules.

Chopko added that he found the ABA policy "personally distressing" because of his position within the association. He was chair-elect of the Charitable, Religious and Nonprofit Organizations Committee of the Tort and Insurance Practice Section. He also "served informally" as liaison between members of the legal community who represent religious organizations and "my own section."

"That role I relinquish to others," he added.

"If it is at all humanly possible I would hope the ABA would see this decision as a mistake of huge proportion," Chopko said, adding that he hoped the organization would recon-

sider its decision "as members begin to withdraw, as public reaction grows and as dissatisfaction grows ..."

Richard Collins, spokesman for the bar association, told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview Sept. 10 that the 1,500 resignations was the largest number he had seen in the 16 years he has worked there.

"Obviously we regret the loss of members," he said, but he added that the number was a small percentage of the organization's 370,000 members.

Collins pointed out that ABA has 750 policy positions and "no one agrees on all of them." He said the organization has received many letters from those who believe the ABA

should be neutral on the abortion issue, but are not resigning because they want to "continue to work with other policies."

"Possibly another motion would come up to bring the organization to return to a position of neutrality, but I have not heard of any such movement underfoot," he added.

In a related action, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights has called on Attorney General William Barr to end the role the ABA has in the judicial selection process.

Since the 1950s the Justice Department has submitted names of possible federal judges, including candidates for the Supreme Court, to the AMA Standing Committee on the Federal Judiciary for a confidential rating of their qualifications. Those who are rated "not qualified" are unlikely to be appointed.

In a letter to Barr, Catholic League president John Puthenveetil said the ABA by its endorsement of "the abortion agenda" has "chosen to be one more political interest group rather than a non-political professional association."

He said that since the issue of abortion had become part of the questioning process for judicial nominees an organization that supports laws favoring abortion should not be part of the selection process.


In a separate statement, Puthenveetil asked Catholic League members who were part of the ABA to "stand and fight."

He noted that it would be better to stay in the organization and carry on the struggle than resign. Puthenveetil also congratulated ABA members who voted to oppose the ABA policy on abortion. In its September newsletter the Catholic League asks its own members to write to Barr.

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