

Judge rules clinics law violates Constitution

By Carol Zimmermann
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Pro-life activists applauded a federal judge's ruling March 16 that a law guaranteeing access to abortion clinics is unconstitutional.

"The decision by a U.S. federal court represents a major victory for the pro-life movement in America," said the Rev. Patrick Mahoney, director of the Christian Defense Coalition, during a Washington press conference the next day.

U.S. District Court Judge Rudolph Randa dismissed charges against six people who blocked entrances to a Milwaukee clinic in September, saying the Freedom of Access law was unconstitutional. Each had faced up to six months in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

The Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, or FACE, was passed last year to prevent protests in front of abortion clinics. The law sets fines of up to \$100,000 and jail terms of up to one year for first offenders and fines up to \$250,000 with three-year jail terms for subsequent convictions.

So far the law has been upheld by seven federal judges and one appeals court.

The six defendants in the Milwaukee case had parked two vehicles to block the entrance to Affiliated Medical Service, a clinic where abortions are performed.

In *United States v. Wilson*, Randa ruled that Congress lacks the authority under the commerce clause to pass a statute regulating private activity within a state that does not affect interstate commerce.

James Henderson, attorney for the American Center for Law and Justice said the decision should be seen as "reasonable" because it was not about abortion, but about congressional authority.

"We're hopeful now, because this decision builds conflict, making it more likely to go to the Supreme Court."

"The court (decision) affirmed what we've been saying for years," that it is unconstitutional to prevent demonstrations, added the Rev. Mahoney.

Bob Jewett, media coordinator for Operation Rescue, called the defendants "heroes" because they "put themselves in a position for God to rescue them."

"Making a federal felony out of peaceful demonstrations is unbelievable," he told CNS. He said the ruling would be an "awakening of the (pro-life) movement," saying many people have not even been involved with sidewalk counseling since the law went into effect.

When asked if a decrease in peaceful protests was also because of the shootings earlier this year at abortion clinics, Jewett said, "If (activists) are given a platform to peacefully demonstrate they would not use violence."

The Rev. Mahoney disagreed with a description of Randa's decision as being "just a strange blip on the screen" as stated by Roger Evans, director of litigation for the Planned Parenthood Federation of America in New York.

"It is not a blip," the Rev. Mahoney said. "It's probably the most significant pro-life victory."

The U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities has voiced their opposition to FACE.

Helen Alvare, director of planning and information for the secretariat, told CNS in an interview last year that the law was unnecessary because already hundreds of state and local laws protect clinics and their employees from protesters who go too far.

Poisoned passengers

The gas swept through crowded Tokyo subway cars during rush hour, killing eight people and injuring more than 4,700 others. An anti-semitic sect is under investigation for the killings.



Reuters/RNS

Special chemical control unit members don anti-gas suits as they emerge from an entrance to Tokyo's Kasumigaseki subway station, which was filled with deadly nerve gas March 20.

Pope to cap millennium with visit to Holy Land

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II plans to walk in the patriarch Abraham's footsteps in an end-of-the-millennium visit to Iraq, Jordan, Israel and Syria, a Vatican spokesman said.

The pope also hopes to usher in the year 2000 by meeting with Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and on Mount Sinai in Egypt, said spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls.

The pope has spoken of his desire to visit the lands of the Bible during the next five years, but without naming specific countries. Navarro-Valls made the remarks March 15 during an Italian television special on preparations for the year 2000.

The spokesman said that while papal trips often have political repercussions, that would not be the intent of the visits to the volatile regions of the Holy Land.

"The meetings he plans to hold with Jews and Muslims in the Holy Land are essentially occasions of religious dialogue among believers, and political significance should be excluded," Navarro-Valls said.

In the same broadcast, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres welcomed the idea of a papal visit, and said the plans for interfaith meetings show that the pope has "the great merit of tolerance."

A visit to Jerusalem has long been on the pope's list of travel priorities, but it has been considered impractical in the face of current political tensions in the holy city, according to Vatican officials.

The pope's plans for visits to biblical

lands are only part of an ambitious program of church initiatives to mark the coming millennium. He outlined the program in an apostolic letter last fall.

On March 16, the pope named 22 members of the Central Committee for the Jubilee of the Holy Year 2000. They included one American, Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard University law professor and a member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.

The appointments established separate commissions for ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, liturgy, martyrology, theology, social issues, art and culture, the mass media and pastoral actions.

The central committee will be led by a group of several cardinals, under the presidency of French Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, who heads the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

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