

WORLD & NATION

Bishops call for reversal of 'right-to-die' ruling

By Jerry Filteau
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Washington state's attorney general has announced that she will ask the U.S. Supreme Court to reverse the "right to die" decision of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

In a letter March 25 to Oregon's bishops, Washington Attorney General Christine O. Gregoire said, "Our office expects to file the petition (of appeal) in the next 30 days."

"This is a significant issue for the nation, a watershed issue of public policy that requires the review and analysis of our nation's highest court," she wrote.

At stake is the legal status of physician-assisted suicide, a practice never before permitted under U.S. law. The appeals court declared March 6 that the Washington law barring any person from assisting in another's suicide is unconstitutional because it denies the terminally ill their constitutional right to determine when and how they will die.

Gregoire also announced the filing of a motion March 25 asking the appeals court to delay implementation of its decision pending disposition of the appeal in the Supreme Court.

Gregoire said the state could have waited until June 4

— 90 days after the appellate decision — to submit its appeal to the Supreme Court. She said it decided to do so earlier so the Supreme Court would be able to decide whether to take the case during its current term, which is slated to end June 30.

Gregoire wrote to Oregon's bishops in response to a letter from them March 21 urging her to appeal the lower-court ruling.

They called the ruling "a dangerous precedent in American law" that would cast aside basic principles of medical ethics, law and public policy.

"Not only would medical ethics change radically in this nation, but the decriminalization of physician-assisted suicide would send a tragic message to the teenagers in today's troubled society and world," they said.

They cited findings by the Oregon Health Division "that in 1994 Oregon had a suicide rate 37 percent above the national average and that there was a 26 percent increase in suicides among 15- to 24-year-olds." In 1994 Oregonians were engaged in a wide public debate over a referendum proposal on that fall's ballot to legalize assisted suicide for the terminally ill.

Signing the letter were Bishop Thomas J. Connolly of Baker and Bishop Kenneth D. Steiner, auxiliary bishop and administrator of the Portland Archdiocese.

In a separate statement on the case the bishops of Ari-

zona also called for Supreme Court reversal of the decision, which they said "advances neither health care nor human rights."

"This decision, if not reversed, could undermine some of our country's most cherished traditions," they said.

The 9th Circuit, based in San Francisco, covers Alaska, Arizona, California, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Washington and Guam.

Signing the Arizona statement were Bishops Thomas J. O'Brien of Phoenix, Manuel D. Moreno of Tucson and Donald E. Pelotte of Gallup, N.M., whose diocese includes a large portion of northeastern Arizona.

In another comment on the assisted-suicide ruling, Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York called it unsurprising "in a land where we have become almost monstrously contemptuous of human life."

Writing March 21 in his archdiocesan newspaper, *Catholic New York*, the cardinal said, "When 1.5 million babies can be killed before birth every year, without a murmur except from 'those crazy pro-lifers' who oppose freedom, what can't happen?"

If the appeals court decision is allowed to stand, he said, it "will ultimately be interpreted to cover every situation, young, old, retarded, wheelchair, mentally competent, mentally incompetent — anybody that anybody in power decides is 'useless.'"



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