

## Catholic bishops attack euthanasia

Catholic bishops in the United States escalated their efforts to halt the spread of the Nazi policy of euthanasia, in a statement adopted by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) Administrative Committee during its Sept. 10-12 meeting in Washington, D.C., and in a call issued by New York Cardinal John O'Connor. The statements come as the "quality of life" ethic in the U.S. has taken a radical turn, from efforts to improve the lives of the poor, lonely, needy, and ill, to a view that those who cannot have "quality of life" should not live.

### Expand the pro-life fight

Cardinal O'Connor called on the pro-life movement in late September to expand the focus of its efforts beyond the single-issue fight against abortion. According to the *Arlington Catholic Herald*, O'Connor said the pro-life movement's "persistent efforts to protect the unborn" must also be marshaled to resist attacks on the right to life of "the aging, the weak, the handicapped, the retarded." Cardinal O'Connor is chairman of the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Committee for Pro-Life Activities.

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops, in their statement, drew the line against acceptance by society of active euthanasia—murder. Destroying "the boundary between healing and killing would mark a radical departure from longstanding legal and medical traditions" in the U.S., it read. Calling for the rejection of proposals to legalize euthanasia, the committee asked all involved in the debate "to seek solutions to the problems of terminally ill patients and their families that respect the inherent worth of all human beings, especially those most in need of our love and assistance."

The NCCB statement warned that "A decision to take one's life or to allow a physician to kill a suffering patient . . . is very different from a decision to refuse extraordinary or disproportionately burdensome treatment." Those advocating euthanasia are capitalizing on "people's confusion, ambivalence, and even fear about the use of modern life-prolonging technologies," and, "borrowing language from the abortion debate," are insisting that a right to choose "prevail over all other considerations. . . . Being able to choose the time and manner of one's death, without regard to what is chosen, is presented as the ultimate freedom."

In a useful addition, the NCCB statement singled out for

attack the Hemlock Society, headed by Derek Humphrey, one of the leading organizations of the pro-euthanasia lobby. "Current efforts to legalize euthanasia place our society at a critical juncture," the statement read. "These efforts have received growing public attention due to new publications giving advice on methods of suicide and some highly publicized instances in which family members or physicians killed terminally ill persons or helped them kill themselves.

"Proposals such as those in the Pacific Northwest, spearheaded by the Hemlock Society, aim to change state laws against homicide and assisted suicide to allow physicians to provide drug overdoses or lethal injections to their terminally ill patients."

### Principles for life

The Catholic bishops defended the sanctity of life on the basis of Church doctrine and the American Declaration of Independence. "As Catholic leaders and moral teachers, we believe that life is the most basic gift of a loving God—a gift over which we have stewardship but not absolute dominion. Our tradition, declaring a moral obligation to care for our own life and health and to seek such care from others . . . clearly and strongly affirms that as a responsible steward of life one must never directly intend to cause one's own death or the death of an innocent victim by action or omission. As the Second Vatican Council declared, 'Euthanasia and willful suicide' are 'offenses against life itself' which 'poison civilization'; they 'debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honor of the Creator.' . . .

"As the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has said, 'Nothing and no one can in any way permit the killing of an innocent human being, whether a fetus or an embryo, an infant or an adult, an old person or one suffering from an incurable disease or a person who is dying.' Moreover, we have no right 'to ask for this act of killing' for ourselves or for those entrusted to our care; 'nor can any authority legitimately recommend or permit such an action.' We are dealing here with a 'violation of the divine law, an offense against the dignity of the human person, a crime against life and an attack on humanity' (Declaration on Euthanasia, 1980).

"Legalizing euthanasia would also violate American convictions about human rights and equality. The Declaration of Independence proclaims our inalienable rights to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' If our right to life itself is diminished in value, our other rights will have no meaning. To destroy the boundary between healing and killing would mark a radical departure from longstanding legal and medical traditions of our country, posing a threat of unforeseeable magnitude to vulnerable members of our society. Those who represent the interests of elderly citizens, persons with disabilities and persons with AIDS or other terminal illnesses are justifiably alarmed when some hasten to confer on them the 'freedom' to be killed."