



NCPD

NATIONAL CATHOLIC PARTNERSHIP ON DISABILITY

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Physician-Assisted Suicide Presents Clear and Dangerous Threat to Lives of People with Disabilities

(Bellevue, WA) On Thursday June 16, 2011, at their Spring General Assembly in Seattle, the U.S. Catholic bishops voted on a statement outlining the Church's moral objections to physician-assisted suicide. The statement, *To Live Each Day with Dignity*, details longstanding Church teaching on the life and dignity of the human person, and reflects on how this teaching relates to people with terminal illness, chronic conditions, and disabilities.

The National Catholic Partnership on Disability (NCPD) was invited by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) to provide comments on the draft statement. NCPD Episcopal Moderator **Cardinal Daniel DiNardo** chairs the bishops' Committee on Pro-Life Activities that proposed the draft to the full body of bishops. Notes **Janice L. Benton**, NCPD executive director, "Physician-assisted suicide is a clear threat to the lives of people with disabilities, as well as those with terminal illness. It is yet another example of society's willingness to define a class of people as expendable, worthy of death by legally sanctioned means. We applaud the U.S. Catholic bishops for their statement which defends the dignity of every human life, and offers a true understanding of compassion and choice. NCPD joins with the bishops in rejecting the assertions of the assisted suicide movement. Assisted suicide does not represent a real 'choice' and does not offer compassionate care for persons who in fact require able medical support."

NCPD Board Chair, **Stephen L. Mikochik**, J.D., a Professor of Law at Temple University, contends that these state efforts to legalize physician-assisted suicide serve to protect doctors from liability without any oversight to ensure the patient take the drug voluntarily. **Marie Hilliard**, J.C.L., Ph.D. R.N., Chair of the NCPD Ethics Committee, who also is the Director of Bioethics and Public Policy for the National Catholic Bioethics Center, explains, "The real tragedy of physician-assisted suicide is the message it sends to persons facing serious illness or disability—that their lives are not worth living. And when this message is given by the very professionals who are responsible for the wellbeing of all entrusted to their care, the impact on the health care profession and society is catastrophic. We welcome this prophetic document, which calls for true compassion for those facing serious illnesses, chronic diseases and disabilities, that is, a call to help them to live each day with dignity."

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In 2008, the NCPD Board of Directors issued a declaration in strong condemnation of Washington State's "Death with Dignity" legislation, which is now state law. In their 2008 statement, the Board identified several general principals to consider: these laws are misleading in their name and intention; they substitute lethal prescriptions and illusory safeguards for authentic compassionate care; they do not mandate family involvement (indeed, family members may never know how their loved-one died, since the death certificate must list the underlying terminal condition, and not the lethal medication, as the cause of death). In other countries with such laws, physician-assisted suicide has in fact been extended to those not terminally ill, a realistic prospect in the U.S. where the struggle to contain health care costs has already driven providers to offer less costly alternatives in place of expensive treatment. In Oregon, for example, where physician-assisted suicide is legal, the state public health program has offered lethal medication as an alternative to certain costly chemotherapy. The Board emphatically rejected suicide as a response to disability.

NCPD Board member **Dorothy Coughlin**, Director of the Office for People with Disabilities in the Archdiocese of Portland explains, "As a resident of Oregon, the first U.S. state to legalize assisted suicide, and a family member of a person with profound developmental disability, I am acutely aware of how the passage of physician-assisted suicide legislation has adversely impacted the lives of people with disabilities. You live with the continual fear that whoever is providing medical care will regard your life as having less value, and will weigh the 'risk to benefit' based on their determination of your quality of life. People with disabilities living in Oregon under this legislation, which purports to provide compassion and choice, are at great risk to experience neither."

Thomas Welch, MD, MA is a psychiatrist practicing in Portland, Oregon and a member of the NCPD Council on Mental Illness. As a medical professional, Dr. Welch notes: "Although patients at the end of life might have different sources of distress, they nonetheless deserve the same protection and attention; their physician should not provide the means for their death by suicide. In legalizing physician-assisted suicide, the State, which has a duty to protect its citizens, has set the dangerous precedent of granting the professionals it licenses the authority to declare a person's life over and then to equip them with a means of bringing about their own death."

The bishops' statement will be the basis for a national online seminar sponsored by NCPD on September 20, 2011 for diocesan staff, schools and parishes across the country. **Richard Doerflinger**, Associate Director of the USCCB's Pro-Life Secretariat, will be a featured presenter, along with moral theologian **Rev. Daniel Mindling**, OFM Cap., Academic Dean of Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, MD, and author and disability advocate, **Sr. Janice McGrane** from Philadelphia, PA. **Jerry Freewalt**, Project Director for the Office of Social Concerns from the Diocese of Columbus will moderate the webinar. Information is available at www.ncpd.org; registration opens August 1.

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Since 1982, NCPD has served the U.S. Catholic Church by providing resources, training, consultation and advocacy for the estimated 14 million U.S. Catholics who live with disability. The USCCB refers to NCPD matters dealing with access to faith for persons with disabilities. Visit www.ncpd.org for more information on NCPD's programs and services.