

Bishops won't back abortion measure

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The Catholic church in Montana will not support an anti-abortion ballot initiative that would establish conception as the beginning of life and award constitutional rights to embryos.

In a statement issued this week, Montana bishops Michael Warfel and George Thomas said Constitutional Initiative 100 is not the best strategy for eliminating abortion.

"We are currently working to develop a broad-based coalition to examine ... alternatives that offer a more realistic approach to the protection of human life," the bishops wrote. "We, the Roman Catholic Bishops of Montana, remain dedicated to the protection of life from conception to natural death."

Supporters had asked the Catholic church for help in promoting the measure, which would amend the state constitution to define a person as "a human being at all stages of human development or life, including the state of fertilization," said Moe Wosepka, executive director of the Montana Catholic Conference.

"The bishops agonized over this decision for several months," Wosepka said. "They did not take this decision lightly."

Ultimately, Catholic leaders determined that even if voters approved the ballot initiative, it would be ineffectual.

"This would be immediately overturned," Wosepka said. "There's very little chance this, even if it passed, would be implemented."

The initiative was written by Rep. Rick Jore, a Constitution Party member from Ronan and a staunch opponent of abortion.

Jore could not be reached Friday for comment.

He and other proponents of the measure, dubbed the Montana Personhood Amendment by supporters, have been gathering signatures to place it on the November ballot.

At least 44,615 signatures, including those of 10 percent of the registered voters in 40 of the state's 100 House districts, must be gathered by June.

Jore has said the initiative would make abortion illegal in Montana.

It is not Jore's first attempt to outlaw the practice. During the 2007 Legislature, Jore introduced a bill that would have added a provision to the state constitution establishing inalienable rights to all persons "from the moment of conception."

The measure, House Bill 403, failed a 53-45 vote in the House of Representatives and was not passed on to the Senate.

Wosepka said the Catholic church appreciates all efforts to reduce the number of abortions in Montana. However, he said the church has identified more effective ways to challenge the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision in the Roe v. Wade case, which affirmed the legality of abortion under a woman's constitutional right to privacy.

"The bishops have for many years been active in trying to pass a national amendment to the national constitution," Wosepka said. "They feel that since Roe is a federal issue, an amendment to the federal constitution would be much more effective."

Jore is the only state legislator who belongs to the Constitution Party, which opposes any kind of abortion.

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