

Economics no reason to legalize marijuana, California bishop says

OAKLAND, Calif. – Potential economic gains are no reason for California voters to approve a ballot measure that would legalize limited amounts of marijuana for recreational use, said Bishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of Oakland.

“As tempting as it is during this recessionary time to decide every issue on the basis of its projected economic impact, we have to realize there are higher principles which must guide our conscience,” the bishop said in a commentary on the state’s Proposition 19 that was published Oct. 22 on the website of the California Catholic Conference.

“Prudential judgment calls us to exercise not only practical considerations when making decisions, but first and foremost moral ones,” he added.

The California bishops as a group have not taken any stand on Proposition 19 or any of the other eight ballot questions before the state’s voters Nov. 2.

Proposition 19 would make the cultivation, possession and personal use of limited amounts of marijuana legal under state but not federal law and would allow local governments to collect taxes on it. The cultivation and use of medical marijuana has been legal in California since 1996.

Bishop Cordileone said advocates of Proposition 19 have made “a utilitarian appeal to the economics of the situation” by stating that “multiple billions of untaxed dollars of marijuana are sold illegally in our state while multiple millions of dollars are spent in enforcement of the marijuana prohibition.”

“But such reasoning is overly simplistic and off target,” he said.

Citing the Catholic Church’s affirmation of the dignity of the human person and the resulting “need to care for our bodies,” Bishop Cordileone said Proposition 19 “threatens to seriously erode the good these principles uphold.”

“The ingestion of brain-altering chemicals – legal or illegal – cannot be categorized as good stewardship of our earthly lives,” he said.

In addition, a move to make marijuana use legally and socially acceptable could “then lead to the faulty conclusion that it is also morally acceptable,” the bishop said.

“Adding the use of marijuana to the list of activities that are legal – but not necessarily moral – does not benefit society,” he said.

The bishop disputed assumptions about the proposition’s economic impact, saying it “remains debatable.”

“Widespread use of marijuana will inevitably lead to deteriorating health and increased accidents, with the consequent health care costs involved,” he said. In addition, a black market in marijuana might continue among those who do not want to pay the new taxes, he said.

The bishop also pointed out that California workplaces might lose federal funding because of an inability to earn certification as “drug-free.”

Other aspects of the “legal confusion” that could result from passage of Proposition 19 include the lack of “standards to judge competence when driving under the influence of marijuana” and the “unacceptable legal liabilities” to which the friends, families or employers of marijuana users might be exposed, he said.

Bishop Cordileone urged Catholic voters in California to “pray for wisdom as you form your conscience in anticipation of voting on the propositions on our state’s November ballot.”