

Spain's bishops urge mass protest against abortion legislation

MADRID, Spain - Spain's Catholic bishops are urging church members to protest abortion legislation that would allow girls as young as 16 to terminate pregnancies without parental consent.

"This law is a step backward, as far as defending the right to life of those who are to be born is concerned. It means a greater abandonment of pregnant mothers and irreparable damage to the common good," the bishops' Permanent Commission said in an Oct. 1 statement.

"The lay faithful are rightly responding to the challenge posed, with great moral and social transcendence, by using their right to a peaceful demonstration in order to express their opposition," the bishops said.

The statement was issued amid preparations for a massive protest Oct. 17 in Madrid against the planned liberalizing of abortion laws; the changes were initiated by Socialist Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero.

The bishops' statement said they considered the rally, which organizers hope will attract more than 1 million people, "justified and appropriate."

"The bishops will never cease to recall the church's teaching that both natural and divine law require all human life to be respected as holy from conception to death," the Permanent Commission added. "We therefore cannot fail to share the repulsion that this law has aroused in various important institutions, as well as in a large part of society."

The Zapatero government gave formal approval Sept. 26 to the Bill on Reproductive and Sexual Health and Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy. The legislation would make abortion available on demand in Spain up to 14 weeks into a pregnancy as long as, at least three days before the procedure, the woman receives information about her rights and about the help she can expect to receive as a mother if she continues her pregnancy.

The measure still must be considered by the Spanish parliament.

The conservative opposition Popular Party insisted the proposed measures lacked public support and actually would fuel abortions by encouraging young people to see the procedure as a form of contraception.

Abortion is currently allowed in Spain for the first 22 weeks of pregnancy, but only in cases of rape, genetic defect or threats to a woman's health.

The proposed law is one of several bitterly opposed by the Spanish Catholic Church, which traditionally claims the loyalty of 82 percent of Spain's 40 million inhabitants. The church also has clashed with the government over the relaxing of divorce laws, the legalization of gay marriage and the removal of religious classes from the school curriculum.

Among other reactions, Archbishop Braulio Rodriguez Plaza of Toledo said the bill paid "little regard to sexual health" and "presented abortion as if it was a right."

"The legislators of Europe are engaged in a kind of contradiction, claiming on the one hand they want to expand the individual rights of the people, and on the other working against other rights such as the right to be born and the right to live," the archbishop told Catholics during a Sept. 28 Mass.

"This law is being sent to parliament for enactment, and I expect it will gain majority

approval. But this will not make it right, and future generations will judge us on laws like this," he said.

Catholic groups have also condemned a separate measure, in effect starting Sept. 28, making morning-after pills available on demand to women of any age at pharmacies for less than 20 euros (\$29).