

# **U.S. bishops denounce Amnesty's policy to fight for legal abortions**

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops denounced Amnesty International's recent adoption of a policy to fight for the decriminalization of abortion around the world.

Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., president of the conference, said in an Aug. 23 statement that the U.S. bishops urge Amnesty to "reconsider its error and reverse its policy on abortion."

"This basic policy change undermines Amnesty's long-standing moral credibility and unnecessarily diverts its mission," Bishop Skylstad said. "In promoting abortion, Amnesty divides its own members ... and jeopardizes its support by people in many nations, cultures and religions who share a consistent commitment to all human rights.

"The essential work of protecting human life and promoting human dignity must carry on. ... But we will seek to do so in authentic ways, working most closely with organizations who do not oppose the fundamental right to life from conception to natural death," he said.

The human rights organization's International Council - more than 400 delegates from 75 countries - approved the proposals at a meeting of Amnesty leaders in Cocoyoc, Mexico, Aug. 11-17 as part of Amnesty's Stop Violence Against Women campaign.

The council voted to "support the decriminalization of abortion, to ensure women have access to health care when complications arise from abortion, and to defend women's access to abortion, within reasonable gestational limits, when their health or human rights are in danger."

On Aug. 18, English Bishop Michael Evans of East Anglia announced he was leaving Amnesty after 31 years of active membership to protest the abortion policy.

Bishop Evans said that the policy made it “very difficult for Catholics to remain members of Amnesty or to give it any financial support.”

“This regrettable decision will almost certainly divide Amnesty’s membership and thereby undermine its vital work,” he said. “Among all human rights, the right to life is fundamental.”

In the 1980s, Bishop Evans served on Amnesty’s British Section Council and its Religious Bodies Liaison Panel.

“I remain deeply committed to Amnesty’s original mandate: to work for freedom for prisoners of conscience, an end to torture and the death penalty, and fair trials for all,” he added.

The bishop said that the Catholic Church shared Amnesty’s strong commitment to oppose violence against women but said that “appalling violence must not be answered by violence against the most vulnerable and defenseless form of human life in a woman’s womb.”

“Catholics would want to show practical compassion for such women and ensure for them all the medical and spiritual care and support they need,” he added. “But there is no human right to access to abortion, and Amnesty should not involve itself even in such extreme cases.”

Amnesty International was set up in 1961 by the late English lawyer Peter Benenson, a convert to Catholicism, to fight for the release of prisoners of conscience, for fair trials for political prisoners and for an end to torture, ill treatment, political killings, disappearances and the death penalty. Bishop Evans joined the group in 1976, a year after he was ordained a priest, and immediately began encouraging church-based justice and peace groups to affiliate to the organization.

In 2005 and 2006, the prayer he was asked to compose for Amnesty’s “Protect the Human” campaign, which had the aim of recruiting a million new British members, was published on thousands of posters and cards.

An Amnesty International spokeswoman said in an Aug. 19 statement that the group

“supports freedom of expression of every person.”

“As such Amnesty respects Bishop Michael Evans’ decision to resign his membership from the movement,” she said, noting that other Catholics have continued to support the organization’s work.