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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BISHOPS' SPOKESWOMAN CRITICIZES ASSISTED SUICIDE RULING

WASHINGTON—A spokeswoman for the Pro-Life Secretariat of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops criticized a ruling by a U.S. District Court Judge in Oregon which struck down Attorney General John Ashcroft's directive stating that doctors in Oregon may not misuse federally controlled drugs to assist suicides. The Ashcroft directive had reversed Janet Reno's decision to allow doctors in Oregon to prescribe lethal doses of federally controlled substances to cause the death of patients, which ignored a longstanding federal law prohibiting harmful uses of these drugs. The decision in the case of *Oregon v. Ashcroft* is expected to be appealed by the Department of Justice.

“Suicide among the elderly and those suffering from serious illness or disability is not a ‘medical practice’ but a tragic public health problem deserving a thoughtful, caring response,” said Cathleen A. Cleaver, Esq., Director of Planning and Information for the USCCB's Secretariat for Pro-life Activities. “All of the Oregon assisted suicide deaths have been a federal affair: The doctors held prescribing licenses issued by the federal government and wrote prescriptions for federally-controlled drugs using their official federal registration numbers. This federal involvement in assisted suicide tells suffering people that their country finds their lives expendable. Is this what America stands for?”

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“Assisted suicide in Oregon has been a fraud,” Cleaver said. “The law was supposed to be an answer to the problem of incurable pain. But according to the Oregon Health Division, *not one* of the 27 people who died from assisted suicide in 2001 cited uncontrollable pain as their primary reason for wanting to die. Instead, the reasons were psychological and social in nature.” Cleaver said, “The sad truth is that Oregonians are killing themselves with the help of doctors because they are *depressed*.”

The Ashcroft directive restored the uniform enforcement of the longstanding federal Controlled Substances Act. It also clarified that aggressive pain management is legitimate medical care even where it unintentionally increases the likelihood of a patient's death. While proponents of euthanasia charged that such laws would make doctors reluctant to use morphine and similar drugs to ease pain, just the opposite is true. In the last 10 years, 10 states have strengthened their laws against assisted suicide and added the “safe harbor” clarification of the Ashcroft directive. *In every case*, morphine use increased by 50% on average the very next year.

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