Virginia bishops 'dismayed' by vetoes of 'life and liberty' measures

by Catholic News Service

Richmond, Va. — Amid his vetoes of several bills passed by the Virginia Legislature, Gov. Terry McAuliffe "made three decisions that contradict life and liberty at their core," said the state's Catholic bishops.

"We are dismayed and deeply disappointed that he sided with the abortion industry over real health care centers, vetoed legislation that would have protected the right of religious organizations to follow their faith," they said.

With regard to the third decision, they said that "instead of vetoing expanded use of the electric chair, [he] inserted language that would shroud in secrecy the execution process."

Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo of Richmond and Bishop Paul S. Loverde of Arlington made the comments in a joint statement issued April 11 by the Virginia Catholic Conference, the bishops' public policy arm.

McAuliffe vetoed 32 of 811 bills state lawmakers sent to his desk for action by midnight April 10.

Two measures he vetoed addressed by the bishops would have:

- Blocked future funding for Planned Parenthood.
- Allowed religious organizations, clergy and employees the right to refuse to officiate at, or provide services to, same-sex couples' wedding ceremonies if such ceremonies were contrary to their religious beliefs. The bill would have shielded opponents of same-sex marriage from civil and criminal penalties.
The third bill the bishops discussed in their statement was on the death penalty. The Legislature approved a measure to make the electric chair the automatic method of execution if the state could not get the drugs used in lethal injections. Various states have experienced shortages of the compounds used in those executions.

McAuliffe said he would veto it unless lawmakers accepted his language authorizing the state Department of Corrections to mix the execution compounds of drugs rather than try to obtain them from suppliers. His wording, which was approved, also provides for the names of suppliers to be kept secret.

DiLorenzo and Loverde noted that McAuliffe, a Catholic, chose to veto the Planned Parenthood bill at one of the organization's abortion centers, "where the lives of countless unborn children are snuffed out each year."

They said he used the March 29 occasion "to boast that he was 'proud' to 'smack down' legislation that would have diverted tax dollars away from the billion-dollar life-draining abortion industry and instead would have applied Virginia taxpayers' hard-earned dollars toward life-affirming community health centers that provide a broad range of real health care for women and their families."

A day later on live radio, he vetoed the religious freedom measure that the bishops said "simply would have protected the right of religious organizations to follow their religious beliefs regarding marriage, applying the exact principles the founders of our Commonwealth and our country intended."

McAuliffe "alleged the bill was 'nothing more than an attempt to stigmatize' -- an unfounded and completely erroneous charge," the bishops said.

"Our Catholic agencies each year educate tens of thousands of Virginia's children; serve the poor and vulnerable through food banks, homeless shelters, mental health counseling and job training; and offer assistance to refugees and immigrants. We do not 'stigmatize'; we serve," they added.

Regarding the death penalty, DiLorenzo and Loverde praised those legislators who had voted for the stop-funding bill and the religious freedom measure and also the "thousands of Catholic Virginians and other people of goodwill throughout the state," as well as the Catholic conference for their "intensive advocacy throughout many months" to promote passage of those measures.

They also lamented the governor's decision not to veto the death penalty measure.

"We are profoundly disappointed with Governor McAuliffe's actions on these vital issues," the two prelates said. "Yet we will persist as people of faith in our efforts -- in parishes and the public square -- to ensure we protect life at the beginning, life at the end and religious liberty for all who serve to make life better for people in need."
