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Federal judge calls pro-life license plate 'viewpoint discrimination'

by Catholic News Service

Raleigh, N.C. — The Catholic bishops of North Carolina said they were "deeply saddened" that a federal judge ruled the state cannot issue "Choose Life" license plates without offering a choice of plates with a different viewpoint.

U.S. District Court Judge James C. Fox ruled Friday that North Carolina's attempt to offer "Choose Life" plates only is unconstitutional because it is "viewpoint discrimination in violation of the First Amendment."

"The decision by a federal judge to ban the 'Choose Life' license plate in North Carolina is a tremendous disappointment," Bishops Peter J. Jugis of Charlotte and Michael F. Burbidge of Raleigh said in a joint statement.

"We are deeply saddened that North Carolina cannot join the many other states that allow their citizens to display the 'Choose Life' plates. We support the effort to encourage the attorney general of our state to appeal this decision."

Fox ruled on a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union on behalf of four "pro-choice automobile owners" who contended the "Choose Life" plates were state-sponsored discrimination.

The North Carolina bishops have supported the "Choose Life" license plates since 2008, when Catholic Voice NC was established. It was the first issue that the bishops asked supporters to contact their legislators about.

Catholic Voice NC is a nonpartisan entity that operates under the authority of the state's two Catholic

bishops. It offers free membership to North Carolina residents, and according to its website thousands have joined. Members are often asked to contact their elected representatives to ensure that a Catholic viewpoint is taken into consideration.

Republican state Rep. Mitch Gillespie, who sponsored the "Choose Life" bill in the House, said he will encourage the North Carolina Attorney General's Office to appeal the decision, the Diocese of Raleigh reported.

According to the *Catholic News Herald*, Charlotte's diocesan newspaper, the "Choose Life" plates were approved by the Legislature after a seven-year effort on the part of supporters.

The state already issues specialty license plates for everything from the Blue Ridge Parkway to NASCAR. Opponents of the pro-life plates say the state should offer one that supports legal abortion slogans such as "Respect Choice."

The cost to drivers for the North Carolina pro-life plate would be an extra \$25, with \$15 of the fee to be distributed through the Carolina Pregnancy Care Fellowship to education efforts for women considering an abortion.

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According to the website of the organization Choose Life Inc., 29 states have pro-life specialty license plates available to car owners. The organization is taking working with pro-life groups in 12 other states to make the plates available.

In New York state, the effort to get a pro-life specialty plate has been under way for more than 10 years. Proceeds for the extra fee drivers there would pay for the plate would benefit the Children First Foundation, which encourages adoption.

According to an editorial in the Nov. 29 issue of *Catholic New York*, newspaper of the New York Archdiocese, lawmakers who oppose the pro-life plate are against them because "its crayon-drawn slogan, 'Choose Life,' is not, apparently, politically correct."

"In fact, in 2004 the state's Department of Motor Vehicles suspended all new custom plates in a cut-off-your-nose-to-spite-your-face move just so they wouldn't be forced to accept 'Choose Life,' " the editorial said. "That means even such worthy sentiments and causes as a 9/11 memorial plate and a Cure Childhood Cancer plate have been turned down -- with some 280 organizations blocked in all."

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