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West Virginia bishop urges prayers for passage of abortion bill

by Colleen Rowan by Catholic News Service

Wheeling, W.Va. — The proposed Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act is "a wonderful opportunity to protect life," said Bishop Michael J. Bransfield of Wheeling-Charleston, who asked Catholics in the statewide diocese to join him in praying that it becomes state law.

The state House passed the bill by a vote of 79-17 on Feb. 25, and it will be considered by the state Senate. It would prohibit nearly all abortions after 20 weeks in West Virginia.

"The bill responds to medical evidence that demonstrates an unborn child's ability to feel pain already at 20 weeks," Bransfield said in a statement. "This bill seeks to prohibit nearly all abortions after 20 weeks post-fertilization."

Exceptions include saving the mother's life or to avert serious risk of substantial and irreversible physical impairment of a major bodily function.

The bishop said it is hard to understand why the protection of human life is not an obvious choice in West Virginia.

"We value life in all its forms in this 'Mountain State,' especially the right to human life," he said. "We can be proud that our state does not authorize capital punishment. When legislation appears to protect the fetus from real human suffering, it seems only natural that we would decide on behalf of human life and its protection in law."

In his statement, Bransfield said it was troublesome to him that there are those who cannot imagine the suffering of an unborn child, calling it "a failure in compassion." He commended the state Legislature for

passing initiatives for children and said that he hopes lawmakers will extend such protections to the state's unborn.

The Wheeling-Charleston Diocese "is hopeful that state government can add to these efforts and take this positive step to protect the lives of unborn children," he said, urging Catholics to support the Pain-Capable Unborn Child Protection Act by contacting their elected representatives and urging they vote for it.

Bransfield also urged Catholics "to pray with me" that the bill passes so it can become law this year. "Please let us have a vote for life in West Virginia," he added.

Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of the Susan B. Anthony List, issued a statement applauding the West Virginia House for joining a "swift moving popular movement" in the country "to protect unborn children from the painful death of abortion after 20 weeks -- that's more than halfway through pregnancy."

Surveys show that "the majority of Americans -- and women in higher numbers than men -- support this measure," Dannenfelser added.

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She praised the 33 Democrats for supporting the House measure, including five women "who, bucking pressure from the abortion lobby, voted for this compassionate, pro-woman legislation."

Dannenfelser urged U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., a Catholic, to co-sponsor related federal legislation. She noted he describes himself as pro-life.

Last year the U.S. House passed a similarly named bill, and the U.S. Senate has taken up such a measure. Ten states have enacted similar provisions, including two that are being challenged in Georgia and Idaho.

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Rowan is editor of The Catholic Spirit, newspaper of the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston.

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