

Dr. Nathanson, abortion proponent turned pro-life advocate, dies at 84

WASHINGTON - Dr. Bernard N. Nathanson, once a leading figure in the movement to legalize abortion and to keep it legal, spent the last decades of his life raising awareness about the horrors of abortion and repenting for the tens of thousands of abortions for which he felt responsible.

Nathanson, who died of cancer Feb. 21 in New York, also described himself for many years as a Jewish atheist but was baptized a Catholic in 1996 by Cardinal John J. O'Connor, then the archbishop of New York.

Funeral arrangements were pending.

Nathanson, who was 84, was one of the founders of the organization now known as NARAL Pro-Choice America (originally the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws) and director of New York's Center for Reproductive and Sexual Health, which he described as the largest abortion facility in the Western world.

But he first began expressing doubts about his involvement in abortions in a 1974 article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in which he said he was "deeply troubled by my own increasing certainty that I had in fact presided over 60,000 deaths."

Nathanson stopped performing abortions in the late 1970s and later narrated "The Silent Scream," a 28-minute film depicting the abortion of a 12-week-old fetus. He also wrote and lectured widely about the evils of abortion.

"We see the child's mouth open in a silent scream," he said as the ultrasound image showed the child attempting to move away from the surgical instruments. "This is the silent scream of a child threatened imminently with extinction."

Former Sen. Gordon Humphrey told *Time* magazine in 1984 that the film represented "a high-technology 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' arousing public opinion just as Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 anti-slavery novel ignited the abolitionist movement."

Father Frank Pavone, who said he visited with Nathanson in the week before his death, described the doctor's life as a remarkable story of God's mercy and power.

"I will never forget the workshop at which I introduced him at the 1994 Human Life International conference in Irvine, Calif.," said the national director of Priests for Life. "He was supposed to talk about chemical abortion, but at the last minute decided instead to speak of his spiritual journey.

"At the end of his talk, he said that he was standing on the brink of conversion to the Catholic Church. The room exploded. People were leaping into the air," Father Pavone continued. "He said that he hoped God could forgive him and I said, 'Dr. Nathanson, he already has.' And I reminded him of that exchange just last week."

Jeanne Head, who represents the National Right to Life Committee at the United Nations in New York, said Nathanson "was probably one of the individuals most responsible for Roe v. Wade and, once he realized his error, he dedicated the rest of his life to reversing it."

In his 1996 autobiography, "The Hand of God," Nathanson wrote: "Abortion is now a monster so unimaginably gargantuan that even to think of stuffing it back into its cage ... is ludicrous beyond words. Yet that is our charge - a herculean endeavor."

Born July 31, 1926, in New York City, Nathanson followed in his father's footsteps to become an obstetrician-gynecologist after studies at Cornell University in Ithaca, N.Y., and McGill University Medical College in Montreal and residency assignments in Chicago and New York.

In his autobiography, Nathanson acknowledged performing an illegal abortion of his own child when a girlfriend got pregnant in the 1960s.

In all, Nathanson said he performed about 5,000 abortions, presided over 60,000 of them as director of the New York clinic and instructed fellow doctors in performing 15,000 more.

More than a decade after he became pro-life, Nathanson was baptized in a private ceremony at St. Patrick's Cathedral by Cardinal O'Connor. Joan Andrews Bell, who spent more than a year in jail because of abortion clinic protests, was his godmother.

“He was like St. Paul, who was a great persecutor of the church, yet when he saw the light of Christ, he was perhaps the greatest apostle for the Gospel,” Bell told the National Catholic Register newspaper. “Dr. Nathanson was like that after his conversion. He went all around the world talking about the babies and the evils of abortion.”

Also in 1996, Nathanson earned a degree in bioethics from Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn.

Nathanson’s first three marriages ended in divorce, but shortly after his baptism he was married in the church to the former Christine Reisner, who survives him.

He also is survived by an adult son, Joseph, from an earlier marriage.