



South Dakota Catholic Conference

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Joint Statement of the Spiritual Leaders of the Roman Catholic Dioceses of South Dakota on Ballot Measure to Legalize Marijuana

June 6, 2024

Optional Memorial of Saint Norbert, Bishop

On June 3, 2024, the South Dakota Secretary of State certified for the November general election ballot an initiated measure that would legalize the use, possession, and distribution of marijuana (cannabis) for so-called “recreational” purposes. The proposal has been designated as Initiated Measure 29.

As Christians we must carefully consider how “recreational” marijuana legalization will affect the welfare of individuals and the common good. As spiritual leaders, desiring that every person in our state experience well-being in mind, body and spirit, we share this resource with the hope that it may shed light on how we can support human flourishing, and avoid that which brings harm to others and the common good.

There is a widespread perception in society today that marijuana is a harmless drug. This perception is radically at odds with the available evidence. Marijuana has evolved into a far more toxic substance over the last several decades. The Mayo Clinic describes this trend:

“Today’s marijuana is enhanced genetically and bred for potency. The tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, content, about 10 milligrams per joint in the 1970s, is **five to 15 times more potent today**. THC is the active ingredient that gives cannabis its narcotic and psychoactive effects.”¹ [emphasis added]

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) states that marijuana use can result in permanent IQ loss, and that studies link it to depression, anxiety, suicide planning, and psychotic episodes.² The National Institute on Drug Abuse states that frequent users of marijuana experience lower life satisfaction, poorer mental health, poorer physical health, more relationship problems, less academic and career success, higher likelihood of dropping out of school, and more job absences, accidents, and injuries.³ The South Dakota State Medical Association has stated that societal costs of marijuana legalization include more victims of drugged driving accidents, more emergency room visits, and increased need of addiction treatment for the uninsured.⁴

There is abundant evidence that marijuana contributes to a host of problems that weaken the social fabric of society. A central pillar of Catholic social teaching is our duty to promote the common good, which is defined as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”⁵ Expressed in a different way, we seek to create the conditions that are most likely to lead to human flourishing—for all our state’s citizens. Legalizing marijuana won’t contribute to human flourishing; rather, it contributes to human harm.

We are especially concerned about the impact of marijuana legalization on our young people. The most recent research concludes that youth consumption of marijuana has increased significantly in states that have legalized recreational marijuana.⁶

A 2021 report from SAMHSA describes marijuana use among youth and young adults as a “major public health concern.” The report notes that early youth marijuana use is associated with neuropsychological and neurodevelopmental decline, poor school performance, increased school drop-out rates, increased risk of psychotic disorders in adulthood, increased risk for later depression, and suicidal ideation or behavior.⁷

Much has been written in recent years about the mental health crisis that is afflicting America’s teens.⁸ We believe that legalizing marijuana is akin to throwing more fuel on the fire.

St. Pope John Paul II stated,

“Drug abuse impoverishes every community where it exists. It diminishes human strength and moral fiber. It undermines esteemed values. It destroys the will to live and to contribute to a better society. Drug abuse is indeed a scourge, just as much as famine, a drought or an epidemic. Every year it reaps an increasing harvest of human lives.”⁹

Pope Francis has often echoed these concerns. The Holy Father has stated plainly, “Drug addiction is an evil, and with evil there can be no yielding or compromise.”¹⁰

We bear a responsibility, as faith leaders in South Dakota, to speak out when we perceive an imminent threat to both the spiritual and physical well-being of this state’s citizens. We urge our fellow Christians, and all persons of good will, to oppose Initiated Measure 29 because of the damage it will cause to so many human lives in our state.

Jesus Christ assures us, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10). Illicit drugs lead people away from this authentic happiness that is available to us through discipleship in Christ, and healthy habits that care for the mind, body and spirit. Let us pray that South Dakotans will reject the false promises of drug legalization and focus instead on building a healthy culture in which all individuals and families in our state can flourish.



The Most Reverend Donald E. DeGrood
Bishop of Sioux Falls

Reverend Daniel Juelfs
Diocesan Administrator, Diocese of Rapid City

¹ “The problem with kids and cannabis,” Mayo Clinic website.
<https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/the-problem-with-kids-and-cannabis>

² <https://www.samhsa.gov/marijuana>

³ <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/drugfacts/cannabis-marijuana>

⁴ SDSMA Statement, South Dakota 2020 Ballot Question Pamphlet, page 4.
<https://sdsos.gov/elections-voting/assets/2020BQPamphletColorVersion.pdf>

⁵ Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. 1906.

⁶ “Editorial: Cannabis Legalization and Youth Cannabis Use: Findings from an Updated Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis,” by Devika Bhatia, M.D. Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, May 2024. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/38759882/>

⁷ <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/pep21-06-01-001.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/23/health/mental-health-crisis-teens.html>

⁹ St. Pope John Paul II, Address to the Representatives of the International Conference on Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, June 4, 1987.
https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1987/june/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19870604_conference-drugabuse.html

¹⁰ Pope Francis, address to the International Drug Enforcement Conference, June 20, 2014.
https://www.archivioradiovaticana.va/storico/2014/06/20/pope_no_to_recreational_and_substitute_drugs_in_combatting_addiction/en-1101975