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Brazil rape victim flap leads to new Vatican condemnation

Cindy Wooden Catholic News Service | Jul. 13, 2009

VATICAN CITY
Commenting on the controversial case of a 9-year-old Brazilian rape victim who underwent an abortion, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith said the concern the church needs to show the girl does not change the fact that abortion is wrong.

In declaring that the doctors and others who were involved in helping the girl procure an abortion automatically incurred excommunication, the church does not intend to deny the girl mercy and understanding, said the statement published in the July 11 edition of the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano.*

The penalty of excommunication "places in evidence the gravity of the crime committed (and) the irreparable damage caused to the innocent who was killed, to the parents and to all of society," the statement said.

In early March doctors at a hospital in Recife performed an abortion on the girl, who was pregnant with twins, weighed a little more than 66 pounds and reportedly had been raped repeatedly by her stepfather from the time she was 6 years old. Abortion in Brazil is illegal except in cases of rape or if the mother's life is in danger.

Interviewed by the media after the abortion, then-Archbishop Jose Cardoso Sobrinho of Olinda and Recife noted that abortion always was a sin and that, according to canon law, anyone participating in the abortion -- including the girl's mother and her doctors -- would automatically incur excommunication.

In the midst of expressions of outrage from around the world over what appeared to be a lack of pastoral concern and compassion for the girl, the head of the Pontifical Academy for Life said the church's first reaction should have been to minister to the girl.

The girl "should have been defended, hugged and held tenderly to help her feel that we were all on her side," said Archbishop Rino Fisichella, head of the academy.

The Archdiocese of Olinda and Recife then issued a statement saying, "All of us ... treated the pregnant girl and her family with extreme charity and tenderness. ... All efforts were focused on saving all three lives."

The doctrinal congregation said the statements from church leaders led to some confusion about the position of the church, "taking into account the dramatic situation of the child -- who, it turns out -- was accompanied with pastoral delicacy by the then-archbishop."

"In this regard, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reaffirms that the doctrine of the church on procured abortion has not and cannot change," the statement said.

To deliberately abort a fetus is to kill an innocent human being, it said.

"Regarding procured abortions in certain difficult and complex situations," the doctrinal congregation said that

"the clear and precise teaching" of Pope John Paul II in his 1995 encyclical, "Evangelium Vitae" ("The Gospel of Life"), remains valid.

The statement quoted the encyclical: "It is true that the decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as the decision to rid herself of the fruit of conception is not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience, but out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family. Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it would be better if the birth did not take place. Nevertheless, these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being."

The doctrinal congregation said that performing an abortion to save a mother's life is different from carrying out a medical procedure that may have the side effect of causing a miscarriage as long as the death of the fetus was not the goal of the intervention.

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