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Bishop: Oregon hospital no longer Catholic

Ed Langlois Catholic News Service | Feb. 16, 2010

PORTLAND, Ore. -- The Diocese of Baker has ended the church's official sponsorship of central Oregon's largest medical center, citing the hospital's refusal to adhere to some Catholic teachings.

Baker Bishop Robert F. Vasa said St. Charles Medical Center in Bend "gradually moved away" from church ethical and religious standards and can no longer be called Catholic.

"As bishop, I am responsible for attesting to the full Catholicity of the hospitals in my diocese, a responsibility which I take very seriously, and I have reached the conclusion that I can no longer attest to the Catholicity of St. Charles," Bishop Vasa wrote in the Feb. 18 issue of the Catholic Sentinel, diocesan newspaper for Portland and Baker.

The main point of contention is tubal ligation, a form of permanent female reproductive sterilization.

"It would be misleading for me to allow St. Charles Bend to be acknowledged as Catholic in name while I am certain that some important tenets of the ethical and religious directives are no longer being observed," the bishop said in a statement issued jointly with hospital officials.

The statement said the decision was difficult for all involved.

Mass will no longer be celebrated in the hospital's chapel and all items considered Catholic will be removed from the hospital and returned to the church. The St. Charles name will remain the same and the cross will remain on top of the building.

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Tipton, Ind., founded St. Charles 92 years ago. In the 1970s, the hospital became a community nonprofit organization with the sisters remaining as sponsors.

In 1992, when the sisters decided they could no longer sponsor St. Charles because of the smaller number of sisters, an "association of the Christian faithful" took up the duty of making sure the hospital's Catholic identity was preserved. At the same time, control of policy and operations went to a board of directors.

Bishop Vasa said the association's structure did not give it sufficient authority to control the tenets of Catholic identity as expressed in the U.S. bishops' "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services." In 2007, the bishop asked St. Charles officials for an audit of compliance with the directives. He identified problems and began talks, which hit an impasse.

In the joint statement Feb. 15, hospital administrators and the bishop said they have "respectfully disagreed" on the meaning of some of the directives.

"We are saddened by this decision because of the 92 years of history the St. Charles Bend hospital has had with the Catholic Church," said James Diegel, president and CEO of Cascade Healthcare Community, the parent

company of St. Charles. "But, we have an obligation to provide comprehensive health care services to our patients while remaining true to our values of compassion and caring for all."

Diegel said the Cascade Healthcare board of directors intends to continue using the ethical and religious directives as they have been interpreted by the hospital. Bishop Vasa has encouraged the hospital to stay as close to the directives as possible in the future.

"This is not a condemnation of St. Charles, it is a sadly acknowledged reality," Bishop Vasa wrote in the Sentinel.

The bishop said he is convinced that the St. Charles board genuinely thought the ethical and religious directives were voluntary and optional and board members now cannot see a way to move back into compliance.

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