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# Nun excommunicated for allowing abortion

Michael Clancy | May. 18, 2010

Sister of Mercy Margaret McBride (2008 file photo/CNS)

**PHOENIX** -- A Catholic nun, who was a member of a Phoenix Catholic hospital's ethics committee, was excommunicated and reassigned last week for her role in allowing an abortion to take place at the hospital, according to the Phoenix diocese. The surgery was considered necessary to save the life of a critically ill patient.

The surgery took place at St. Joseph?s Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix. The decision, involving Sister of Mercy Margaret McBride, physicians and the patient, drew a sharp rebuke from Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted, head of the Phoenix diocese. He said abortion is not permissible under any circumstances.

A statement from the diocese said, McBride was excommunicated because she "held a position of authority at the hospital and was frequently consulted on ethicalmatters. She gave her consent that the abortion was a morally good and allowable act according to church teaching. Furthermore, she admitted this directly to Bishop Olmsted. Since she gave her consent and encouraged an abortion she automatically excommunicated herself from the church."

The statement added that other Catholics McBride consulted "who gave their consent and encouraged this abortion were also excommunicated by that very action. So too is anyone else at St. Joseph?s who participated in the action; including doctors and nurses."

Neither Olmsted nor McBride would answer questions about the case. Nor would hospital administrators or officials of Catholic Healthcare West, St. Joseph?s parent company. St. Joseph?s is Phoenix?s first hospital, and one of the area?s most prominent.

The bishop does not have direct control of the hospital, but as bishop he carries authority on matters of faith and morals.

The surgery took place in late 2009 as the patient?s condition worsened. She had a rare and often fatal condition called pulmonary hypertension in which a pregnancy can make things much worse. She was 11 weeks pregnant, according to a statement from the hospital.

Pulmonary hypertension limits the ability of the heart and lungs to function properly, especially when confronted with the physical changes that accompany pregnancy.

McBride, who had been vice president of mission integration at the hospital, was on call as a member of the hospital's ethics committee when the surgery took place, hospital officials said. The committee is called in for circumstances such as these, but the nature of the group?s deliberations is unknown.

The patient was not identified, and details of her case cannot be revealed under federal privacy laws.

The hospital defended the ethics committee's decision.

In a statement, Suzanne Pfister, a hospital vice president, said that the facility adheres to the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services. But, she argued, the directives leave some gray areas.

"In those instances where the Directives do not explicitly address a clinical situation -- such as when a pregnancy threatens a woman's life -- an Ethics Committee is convened to help our caregivers and their patients make the most life-affirming decision,? she said. "In this tragic case, the treatment necessary to save the mother's life required the termination of an 11-week pregnancy.?

Pfister issued the statement on behalf of the hospital, its parent company Catholic Healthcare West, and the Sisters of Mercy, McBride's religious order.

According to the medical directives that the hospital follows, abortion is defined as the directly intended termination of pregnancy, and it is not permitted under any circumstances.

But a second directive allows conditions other than pregnancy to be treated, even if they result in termination of the pregnancy.

In a statement issued late Friday, May 14, the diocese confirmed that Olmsted learned of the case after the surgery.

"I am gravely concerned by the fact that an abortion was performed several months ago in a Catholic hospital in this diocese," Olmsted said. "I am further concerned by the hospital's statement that the termination of a human life was necessary to treat the mother's underlying medical condition.

"An unborn child is not a disease. While medical professionals should certainly try to save a pregnant mother's life, the means by which they do it can never be by directly killing her unborn child. The end does not justify the means."

Olmsted added that if a Catholic "formally cooperates" in an abortion, he or she is automatically excommunicated.

?The Catholic church will continue to defend life and proclaim the evil of abortion without compromise, and must act to correct even her own members if they fail in this duty.?

Olmsted disputed Pfister on whether the health-care directives were vague, arguing that they are ?very clear,? despite the details of the case.

Olmsted is known in the Phoenix Diocese for his strong advocacy of pro-life issues. He has led prayers in front of Planned Parenthood offices several times, has forbid Mass to take place at a Phoenix venue celebrating the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe because the venue previously had hosted Planned Parenthood, and criticized the

Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation for its links to the family-planning organization.

He has not refused Communion to politicians who have taken pro-choice positions.

A letter sent May 10 from Catholic Healthcare West, signed by Sr. Judith Carle, board chairwoman, and President and CEO Lloyd Dean, asks Olmsted to provide further clarification about the directives. Agreeing that in a healthy mother, pregnancy is "not a pathology," it says this case was different. The pregnancy, the letter says, carried a nearly certain risk of death for the mother.

"If there had been a way to save the pregnancy and still prevent the death of the mother, we would have done it," the letter says. "We are convinced there was not."

Fr. John Ehrich, head of Olmsted?s medical ethics committee, disagreed with that conclusion.

?In difficult situations when the mother?s life is threatened by an underlying condition, the solution can never be to directly kill her unborn child,? he wrote for the diocesan newspaper, the Catholic Sun. To do so is an abortion?. The reason for such a procedure never matters.?

McBride was the highest-ranking member of the Sisters of Mercy at the hospital, which the order founded in 1895. In an e-mail, Pfister said McBride has been transferred "to another position in the hospital to focus on a number of new strategic initiatives."

Catholic News Services reported that in a letter to the editor of *The Arizona Republic* May 18, Dr. John Garvie, chief of gastroenterology at St. Joseph's, called McBride "the moral conscience of the hospital" and said "there is no finer defender of life at our hospital."

"What she did was something very few are asked to do, namely, to make a life-and-death decision with the full recognition that in order to save one life, another life must be sacrificed," Garvie said. "People not involved in these situations should reflect and not criticize."

According to a brief biography posted on the hospital's website, McBride "has 34 years of health care experience in both for-profit and not-for-profit health care management." She holds a bachelor's degree in nursing and a master's in public administration, both from the University of San Francisco.

[Michael Clancy is a reporter for *The Arizona Republic* [1].]

More Information:

- Copies of Olmsted and Pfister?s complete statements are here [2].
- The Phoenix diocese put together a resources page on its newspaper's Web site: Resources and more information about the situation at St. Joseph's Hospital [3]
- On the U.S. bishops' conference Web site are the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services [4]

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