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Bishops' doctrine committee: 'direct abortion always wrong'

Jerry Filteau | Jun. 24, 2010

Archbishop Donald Wuerl, chair of the U.S. bishops' Doctrine Committee

WASHINGTON
Analysis
Citing confusion about church teaching raised by media reports, the U.S. bishops? Committee on Doctrine issued a statement [1]of clarification June 23: Direct abortion is always intrinsically wrong and illicit.

The issue arose from widespread media reports about the mid-May revelation that a Catholic hospital in Phoenix, St. Joseph?s Hospital and Medical Center, had performed an abortion last year to save the life of the mother.

Mercy Sr. Margaret Mary McBride, the hospital?s vice president of mission integration and head of its ethics committee, had approved it.

When Phoenix Bishop Thomas Olmsted learned of the abortion, he asked McBride to step down from her post and informed her that by her act she was under automatic excommunication.

The doctrine committee said there were three views of what occurred:

- ?Most Reverend Thomas Olmsted, the Bishop of Phoenix, has judged that this procedure was in fact a direct abortion and so morally wrong.
- ?Some have argued that the procedure was an indirect abortion and therefore a legitimate medical procedure.
- ?Still others have said that even the direct killing of an unborn child is sometimes permitted by Catholic teaching, and that this position is supported by certain provisions of the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, a document issued by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops containing moral principles to be applied in such cases.?

There are two interesting things the doctrine committee did not do in its statement:

- It did not make a direct judgment on whether the abortion in Phoenix was direct or indirect; it only laid out the different views.
- It did not address the question of canonical penalties at all.

What the committee statement does is spell out the difference between direct and indirect abortion and clarify that whenever it is a question of a direct abortion, it is always, intrinsically wrong and is never permitted under Catholic teaching.

This is essentially a negative answer to an opinion posed by some theologians in different ways to respond to the dilemma when a pregnant woman faces almost certain death unless her pregnancy is terminated before the unborn child is viable.

The doctrine committee wrote, ?The position that church teaching supports the direct taking of unborn life has been widely reported at the national level by media outlets, which has cause some confusion? among Catholics.

As an example of an indirect abortion, which is permissible for grave reasons in church teaching, the committee cited the removal of a cancerous uterus of a pregnant woman: The doctor recommends removal of the uterus as the only way to prevent the spread of the cancer.

?The surgery does not directly target the life of the unborn child. ? The death of the child is an unintended and unavoidable side effect and not the aim of the surgery,? the committee said.

?Surgery to terminate the life of an innocent person, however, is intrinsically wrong,? the committee added. ?There are no situations in which it can be justified.?

It quoted Pope John Paul II: ?No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which intrinsically illicit.?

Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.

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