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Phoenix bishop removes hospital's Catholic status

NCR Staff | Dec. 21, 2010

Phoenix Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted in a 2007 file photo. (CNS photo/Nancy Wiechec)

Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix has declared that St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center, located in the diocese, can no longer call itself a Catholic hospital because of a dispute over whether a procedure performed at the hospital last year was a direct abortion.

"It is my duty to decree that, in the Diocese of Phoenix, at St. Joseph?s Hospital, CHW [Catholic Healthcare West] is not committed to following the teaching of the Catholic Church and therefore this hospital cannot be considered Catholic," Olmsted said today in a news conference hosted by the diocese.

"The Catholic faithful are free to seek care or to offer care at St. Joseph?s Hospital but I cannot guarantee that the care provided will be in full accord with the teachings of the Church. In addition, other measures will be taken to avoid the impression that the hospital is authentically Catholic, such as the prohibition of celebrating Mass at the hospital and the prohibition of reserving the Blessed Sacrament in the Chapel."

For Olmsted's full statement, **click here** [1] for a PDF file.
For a copy of Olmsted's official decree removing the hospital's Catholic status, **click here** [2].

The decision came after negotiations between CHW -- the organization which operates the hospital -- and the bishop failed to resolve key differences.

In a press statement posted on the hospital's Web site titled "St. Joseph?s Resolved in Saving Mother?s Life, Confident Following Bishop?s Announcement", Linda Hunt, president of the hospital, said those at the hospital will be "steadfast in fulfilling our mission."

"Consistent with our values of dignity and justice, if we are presented with a situation in which a pregnancy threatens a woman?s life, our first priority is to save both patients. If that is not possible we will always save the life we can save, and that is what we did in this case," said Hunt in the statement.

?We continue to stand by the decision, which was made in collaboration with the patient, her family, her caregivers, and our Ethics Committee. Morally, ethically, and legally we simply cannot stand by and let someone die whose life we might be able to save.?

For the hospital's full statement, **click here** [3] for a PDF file.

Last month Olmsted issued an ultimatum to the hospital to comply with three key demands or face removal of its Catholic status.

In the ultimatum, Olmsted demanded that:

- The hospital ?acknowledge in writing? that the procedure was an abortion.
- The hospital agree to a diocesan certification process to guarantee compliance with Catholic doctrine.
- The hospital provide its medical personnel with ongoing training in the Catholic directives governing health care, ?as overseen by either the National Catholic Bioethics Center or the Medical Ethics Board of the diocese of Phoenix.?

In his statement today, Olmsted said the staff at the hospital and at Catholic Healthcare West "have not addressed in an adequate manner the scandal caused by the abortion."

The medical procedure in question took place in November 2009. A patient with pulmonary hypertension was pregnant, and as the pregnancy made her condition worse, the chances of her survival, and the fetus?, had slipped ever closer to zero.

Doctors recommended terminating the pregnancy, and got the approval of Mercy Sr. Margaret Mary McBride, a hospital administrator who served on the ethics committee. The surgery was done, and the mother survived.

When Olmsted found out, he declared McBride and other Catholics who participated in the procedure to be excommunicated. He then embarked on a series of meetings with hospital officials to discuss the issues, which culminated in the ultimatum and, now, the removal of the hospital's Catholic status.

Looking beyond the specific procedure which initially caused the dispute, Olmsted also claimed in his statement that a health insurance plan available at CHW facilities violates Catholic teaching on contraception and abortion.

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Dec. 22: **Catholic Health Association backs Phoenix hospital**
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Dec. 21: **Phoenix bishop removes hospital's Catholic status** [6]

Dec. 16 and 17: **Phoenix bishop gives ultimatum to hospital** [7].

For Olmsted's full statement, **click here** [1] for a PDF file.

For a copy of Olmsted's official decree removing the hospital's Catholic status, **click here** [2].

For a copy of the bishop's letter of demands to the hospital, **click here** [8] for a PDF file.

For the hospital's full statement, **click here** [3] for a PDF file.

For the hospital's answers to frequently asked questions about Bishop Olmsted's announcement, **click here** [9] for a PDF file.

For more information on the Phoenix hospital and Bishop Olmsted, see our previous stories:

- Bishops' doctrine committee: 'direct abortion always wrong' [10], June 24
- Canon lawyers assess ?automatic? penalty for nun who approved an abortion [11], June 22
- Ethicists fault bishop?s action in Phoenix abortion case [12], June 8
- Thomas J. Olmsted: Portrait of a 'policy-driven' bishop [13], June 3
- Shades of grey in a world of apparent absolutes [14], May 26
- Nun excommunicated for allowing abortion [15], May 18

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