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Bishop Olmsted's Reckless Decision

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Distinctly Catholic

The holidays are always a difficult time for those whose loved ones are desperately ill. In addition to all the usual hustle and bustle of the holiday season, the need to finish up at work before the holiday, arranging travel plans, getting all the special foods for the feast and wrapping the presents and decorating the tree, the family of an ill person has as their central focus their ailing loved one.

It can be a time of great stress and also a time of great grace. When my mother was dying, it seemed like it was going to be the worst Christmas ever. She was unable to decorate the tree ? all of the ornaments are blue and silver because those were her favorite colors. She was unable to cook her Christmas ham or serve peppermint ice cream with hot fudge for dessert, as she always had. In fact, she couldn't eat them either because since the car accident at the end of August she had been on a feeding tube. Yet, it was one of the most blessed Christmases I can remember. The chapel was right down the hall from her room and we could go there to pray in front of the Blessed Sacrament at all hours of the day. We got her into her wheelchair on Christmas Day and brought her to the chapel for Mass. One of the Eucharistic ministers touched her lips with the Precious Blood of Christ, which never seemed so precious as it did that morning. Because of our circumstance or, better to say, because of our need, the palpable grace of the day was so very present, so focused, so real.

This year, the families of those whose loved ones are in St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix will not be able to stop in to the chapel and pray before the Blessed Sacrament as I was able to do. In addition to all their other burdens, they will need to figure out when and where to go to Mass and, of course, they can not bring their loved one to Mass with them. In this sense, whatever motivations he may have had, and whatever the canons of the Church permit, Bishop Thomas Olmsted's decision to strip St. Joseph's Hospital of those parts of its Catholic identity over which he has control is simply cruel, unspeakably cruel.

To be clear: There are circumstances in which a bishop would be justified in insisting that an organization officially affiliated with the Catholic Church has so grievously violated the Church's teachings that the affiliation must be sundered. If the administrators of St. Joseph said, "Yes, we know what we did was a direct abortion and we did it anyway," that would justify such a severance. But, the administration believes that the procedure they approved and performed was not a direct abortion but an indirect one. I do not want to get graphic - this was explained to me in clinical terms yesterday and made me queasy - but the procedure in question really does sound more like an indirect abortion, like the procedures used when faced with an ectopic pregnancy or a cancerous uterus.

The USCCB Committee on Doctrine issued a statement that reaffirmed the Church's opposition to direct abortion in any circumstance but it did not, as some suggest, pronounce on whether the procedure in Phoenix was or was not a direct abortion.

Bishop Olmsted - and some among the conservative blogosphere - now bring an additional charge. Olmsted says he has "recently learned" that Catholic Healthcare West was participating with a third party to run a Medicaid program that distributes contraception and involves other objectionable acts, although the third party, not St. Joseph's or other CHW hospitals, undertook the objectionable acts. What Olmsted does not acknowledge is that the reason he knows about this is because "on their own initiative" St. Joseph's and Catholic Healthcare West have been trying to bring the program more clearly into accord with Catholic directives, negotiating with the state and federal government which is involved because of Medicaid, etc. To most fair-minded people, this would be evidence of good faith not bad, yet Olmsted represents it as news, damning evidence of St. Joseph's lack of Catholicity. That's just creepy on his part.

Is Olmsted over-reacting? His statement is especially telling when he discusses the 2009 abortion. Not once does he acknowledge that the hospital administrators, even if they were wrong, were acting in good faith, reflecting upon sound theological work and in no way trying to skirt around or deny the Church's teaching on the evil of abortion. Not once does he acknowledge that what a theologian considers "direct" may not be what a clinician considers "direct" because the theologian and the doctor practice different skills and medical ethics must involve them both. Not once does Bishop Olmsted acknowledge any of the good works done at the hospital. A priest friend told me he thought Olmsted was acting like a teenager when they first get behind the wheel of a car. A teenager is acutely aware of his lack of power, but when placed behind the wheel, he gets a rush of power and drives like a mad man. Olmsted is one of those bishops who, like Canute, stands before his throne ordering the waves back. His voice gets louder as the waves get closer, and he is incapable of recognizing the ridiculousness of his position.

There may be situations when the drastic measures Bishop Olmsted is taking would be warranted but nothing seems to indicate this is such a situation. The good people at St. Joseph's are not Albigensians. Olmsted may fashion himself a latter day Dominic, but he is really more like the teenager behind the wheel of car my priest friend described, reckless and dangerous. Olmsted is dangerous because he does not recognize that he is the one giving scandal, not the doctors, nurses and administrators at St. Joseph's Hospital.

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