

Phoenix bishop must back off the moral precipice

Richard McBrien | Feb. 21, 2011 Essays in Theology

The dispute between Phoenix Bishop Thomas Olmstead and St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in his city has been brewing for some time. (For a quick recap of the situation, see Jerry Filteau's story: [Phoenix hospital still belongs to Catholic Health Association](#) [1].)

The bishop and the hospital differed in their moral evaluation of a November 2009 procedure, by which doctors removed a diseased placenta to save the woman's life and in the process brought about the death of her 11-week-old unborn child.

The doctors claimed that it was an indirect and unintended abortion -- allowed by the Catholic Church -- while the bishop insisted that the procedure was a direct and intended abortion, and therefore immoral.

In the eyes of the bishop the blame for the procedure fell upon Mercy Sr. Mary Margaret McBride, who had been a member of the hospital's ethics committee that had approved of the decision. Olmstead said that by her action McBride had excommunicated herself and he also stripped St. Joseph's Hospital of its Catholic identity Dec. 21 because of its supposed violation of "authentic Catholic moral teaching."

St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center is part of Catholic Healthcare West, which includes some 40 hospitals in California, Nevada, and Arizona and is one of the largest hospital systems in the United States.

Catholic Healthcare West makes clear in its "Statement of Mission, Vision and Values" that none of its hospitals performs direct abortions, but that indirect abortions *are* performed in certain medically indicated cases. Neither do these hospitals perform physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, donor insemination, or in vitro fertilization.

The Catholic Health Association said that it "does not enter into" questions of "how individual Catholic facilities and systems work with their local ordinary," but it recognizes the local bishop's "complete authority regarding the interpretation of" the U.S. bishops' ethical and religious directives.

It also said that questions of the Catholic character of individual hospitals and hospital systems face possible review when the CHA holds its national assembly in June.

"Several activities in Catholic health care, most notably the change in structure of Boston-based Caritas Christi Health Care, necessitated this review," CHA said.

A six-hospital Catholic system, Caritas Christi was sold last year by the Archdiocese of Boston for \$800 million to the New York-based for-profit system, Ceberus Capital Management.

This had the effect of transforming the traditionally Catholic, nonprofit hospitals into secular, for-profit entities managed by a company noted for acquisitions devoted to improving its financial bottom line.

As New York's Archbishop Timothy Dolan, newly elected President of the U.S. bishops conference recently

noted, the bishops will continue their working relationship with the CHA on legislation, as the CHA itself pointed out, regarding the protection of life, immigration, climate change, and relief efforts in Haiti, to name only a few.

“There are many issues,” the CHA insisted, “that we are in complete agreement on and have continued to work diligently towards both as individual dioceses and as a unified ministry.”

The major issue that has divided the bishops and the CHA is the Health Care Reform legislation that was passed last year by the Congress and signed into law by President Barack Obama. The bishops opposed the law because, they alleged, it provided for wider federal funding of abortions, while the CHA disagreed.

The Phoenix issue also caught the attention of *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (See "[Tussling Over Jesus](#) [2]," Jan. 27). Although he took the same side as I do, the column tended to be a bit one-sided.

McBride “seems to me to have emulated the life of Jesus,” Kristof wrote, while Olmstead failed to do so, having “spent much of his adult life as a Vatican bureaucrat climbing the career ladder.”

I have never met Olmstead (nor McBride, for that matter). I might like him. But in this matter, he was wrong.

He has nowhere to go now but to back off the moral precipice he has put himself on.

[Fr. Richard McBrien is the Crowley-O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. All rights reserved.]

Editor's Note: We can send you an e-mail alert every time Fr. McBrien's column, "Essays in Theology," is posted to NCRonline.org. Go to this page and follow the directions: [E-mail alert sign-up](#) [3]. If you already ~~Source URL (retrieved on 06/25/2017 at 14:08): http://profile.ncronline.org/ Essays in Theology/~~ [stop-must-back-moral-precipice](#)

Links:

[1] <http://ncronline.org/node/22324>

[2] <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/27/opinion/27kristof.html>

[3] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>