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Catholic medical school affiliates with hospital censured by bishop

by Nancy Frazier O'Brien by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- In response to criticism of its affiliation with a Phoenix hospital whose Catholic identity was revoked by the local bishop, Creighton University's School of Medicine remains "confident we can maintain the Catholic and Jesuit values" that have marked the school since its founding in 1892, the school's dean said Tuesday.

Dr. Rowen K. Zetterman told Catholic News Service that the opening of the Phoenix regional campus of the Catholic medical school based in Omaha, Neb., had been in the works since before he became dean three and a half years ago.

He said St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix, which had been taking Creighton medical students for one-month rotations since 2005, approached Creighton about the possibility of a closer affiliation that would bring "full-time, faith-based medical students" to Phoenix for two years of their training.

The first class of 42 third-year medical students started in Phoenix on June 28, while another 110 third-year students remain at the Omaha campus.

In late 2010, Phoenix Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted issued a decree revoking the Catholic affiliation of the hospital after officials there acknowledged that an abortion was performed at St. Joseph's in 2009. He prohibited the celebration of Mass on the hospital's campus and ordered the Blessed Sacrament removed from the hospital's chapel.

After the Creighton students arrived, Olmsted reiterated in a July 23 statement that St. Joseph's "is not a Catholic institution" and "does not faithfully adhere to the 'Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic

Health Care Services."

"Catholics, and all people of good will, are advised that they cannot be guaranteed authentic Catholic health care at St. Joseph's Hospital," the statement added.

The ethical and religious directives, most recently revised by the U.S. bishops in 2001, guide Catholic health care facilities in addressing a wide range of ethical questions, such as abortion, euthanasia, care for the poor, medical research, treatment of rape victims and other issues.

"We knew of the bishop's decision before we sent the first students there," Zetterman said. "We agreed that (the affiliation) would continue."

He said St. Joseph's officials have assured him that they "continue to operate the hospital in the Catholic tradition."

But even if the hospital had no Catholic roots or did not recognize the Catholic tradition, Zetterman said the collaboration could continue. "Even in Omaha, the students work at non-Catholic hospitals" such as the VA Medical Center and Children's Hospital and Medical Center, he said.

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But, Zetterman added, "we ensure that our students understand about the ethical and religious directives" and the Catholic teachings incorporated in them.

The dean said the Phoenix campus has proven a popular option, with more students applying for Phoenix than the 42 slots available. Those studying in Phoenix were chosen by random drawing from among the applicants, he said.

Officials at St. Joseph's Hospital and Dignity Health, the San Francisco-based health system that owns the Phoenix hospital, did not respond to Catholic News Service requests for comment on Olmsted's recent statement.

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