

# After Vatican criticism, Amnesty defends new policy on abortion

LONDON – Amnesty International has defended its new policy on abortion after a Vatican official said Catholics might need to withdraw their financial support of the organization.

“Amnesty International’s position is not for abortion as a right but for women’s human rights to be free of fear, threat and coercion as they manage all consequences of rape and other grave human rights violations,” said Kate Gilmore, the London-based executive deputy secretary-general of the international human rights organization.

“Ours is a movement dedicated to upholding human rights, not specific theologies,” she said in a statement June 14. “It means that sometimes the secular framework of human rights that Amnesty International upholds will converge neatly with the standpoints of certain faith-based communities; sometimes it will not.”

In an e-mail interview with the National Catholic Register in New Haven, Conn., Cardinal Renato Martino, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said Amnesty had “betrayed its mission” by abandoning its traditional neutral policy on abortion in favor of a woman’s right to terminate a pregnancy.

“To selectively justify abortion, even in the cases of rape, is to define the innocent child within the womb as an enemy, a ‘thing’ that must be destroyed,” Cardinal Martino wrote. “How can we say that killing a child in some cases is good and in other cases it is evil?”

“I believe that, if in fact Amnesty International persists in this course of action, individuals and Catholic organizations must withdraw their support because, in deciding to promote abortion rights, AI has betrayed its mission,” the cardinal said.

But Amnesty claimed that it did not promote abortion as a universal right and that it remains silent on the rights and wrongs of abortion.

“Amnesty International’s actual policy ... standing alongside its long-standing opposition to forced abortion, is to support the decriminalization of abortion, to ensure women have access to health care when complications arise from abortion and to defend women’s access to abortion, within reasonable gestational limits, when their health or human rights are in danger,” the June 14 statement said.

In a May 25 letter to supporters of Catholics Against Capital Punishment, Larry Cox, executive director of Amnesty International USA, said that “in the context of war, rape has been used as a brutal instrument of domination. It is committed with the deliberate intention of causing pregnancy, thereby destroying community and family bonds through the pernicious influences of humiliation and shame.”

He noted that in some cultures women who have been raped are killed by their own family members to maintain their honor. He also pointed out that in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, where abortion is illegal, women who have been raped and seek to end the pregnancies “have suffered terribly botched abortions that have had a debilitating impact on their health and, in certain cases, resulted in death.”

He pointed out that the Amnesty policy adopted in April supported access to comprehensive medical care, including safe abortion, for women who have become pregnant from rape, sexual assault or incest, or whose lives or health “are at grave risk due to pregnancy.” The new policy also urges governments to ensure access to health and other services to women who have complications from unsafe abortions. It opposes imprisonment and other criminal penalties for having, providing information about or performing abortions.

Amnesty was set up in 1961 by the late Peter Benenson, an English convert to Catholicism, to fight for the release of prisoners of conscience, for fair trials for political prisoners and for an end to torture, ill treatment, political killings, disappearances and the death penalty.

In April, Amnesty adopted a new policy advocating the global decriminalization of abortion, following an international consultation that arose from the group’s Stop Violence Against Women campaign.

Amnesty now supports a right to abortion for women impregnated by rape or incest or in cases of grave risks to the mother's health or life.

At its international council meeting in Mexico in August, Amnesty will consider expanding its policy on abortion. It said it would decide the question of whether a woman's "right to physical and mental integrity includes her right to terminate her pregnancy."

In New Zealand, a Catholic bishop who deals with education said Catholic schools can still donate to Amnesty International, but they should ensure their funds are not used to support abortion.

In a May 29 letter, Bishop Peter Cullinane of Palmerston North said, "Amnesty International is involved in many aspects of human rights and justice issues ... and our schools are entitled to support these other activities carried out by Amnesty International."

However, Amnesty spokeswoman Eulette Ewart said that Catholics would not be able to specify that money did not go to abortion.

"It is slightly difficult because we are not campaigning for abortion, so no money would go to that, and our money is not divided up that way," she told Catholic News Service June 14. "What we are saying is that in dire situations women should have the right to a safe and legal abortion if they so wish."

Contributing to this story were Barb Frazee in Washington and Gavin Abraham in Auckland, New Zealand.