

Archbishop Dolan reaffirms pledge to help any pregnant woman in need

NEW YORK - In response to recent statistics revealing that 41 percent of pregnancies in New York City in 2009 ended in abortion, New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan reiterated the pledge of his predecessors to help any pregnant woman in need.

"Through Catholic Charities, adoption services, lobbying on behalf of pregnant women, mothers and infants, support of life-giving alternatives, health care and education of youth for healthy, responsible, virtuous sexual behavior, we've done our best to keep that promise and these haunting statistics only prod us to keep at it," he said during a Jan. 6 interfaith news conference in New York.

The statistics were released in late December by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene in its annual summary of vital statistics. According to the figures, the 87,000 abortions performed in New York City in 2009 continues a pattern of decline from previous years, but the overall rate of abortions is much higher than the national average of 23 percent.

Speakers at the news conference called the percentage of abortions tragic and urged renewed efforts to promote chastity and support mothers and their children, born and unborn.

"Not only are we not addressing this human tragedy, we are not even talking about it," said Sean Fieler, president and chairman of the Chiaroscuro Foundation, a private organization based in New York which supports pro-life activities.

Fieler said New Yorkers are still framing the abortion discussion in terms of the procedure's legality instead of focusing on reducing the number of abortions.

"From an action perspective, this is something almost everyone can agree on. No one but the most radical extremist will defend this ratio," he added.

He said the Chiaroscuro Foundation, which began in 2009, will spend \$1 million this year to help reduce the number of abortions in New York. He also told Catholic News Service that the foundation would fund abstinence education and crisis pregnancy programs through the New York Archdiocese, the Sisters of Life, World Youth Alliance and Expectant Mother Care.

Archbishop Dolan said the archdiocese plans to launch an intensive chastity education program in Catholic high schools next year.

“We’re going to have a SWAT team of experts go into our Catholic high schools and give the seniors a high-powered two-week formation in healthy chastity,” he told CNS. “The curriculum will address biological, emotional and moral aspects and include preparation for marriage.

Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn said the diversity of the world’s most multicultural city is being dampened by the abortion rate, which is highest in the black and Hispanic communities. He said sex education programs in public schools are devoid of moral content and may even increase the incidence of abortion.

“We need to pledge ourselves to help people understand the consequences of abortion and do whatever we can to give women reasons not to abort and to help the children in this great city of ours,” he said.

David Zweibel, an Orthodox rabbi and executive vice president of Agudath Israel of America, an organization that promotes Orthodox Jewish activities, said, “Despite our different perspectives, we can all agree that there is something terribly wrong when abortion becomes just another method of birth control.”

He said the best approach to reduce abortions is to change the culture that “glorifies promiscuity and mocks responsibility” or at the very least, to shield young people from the “harmful influences of that culture.”

Sister Lucy Marie, a Sister of Life and Respect Life coordinator for the Archdiocese of New York, said the city’s abortion statistics were sadly familiar. “I wish it was startling to me, but it’s not. Many of the women who come to us have had repeat abortions,” she said.

She said the tragedy is that many pregnant women are in fear and don't know where to go for help. "We have failed to reach out and let them know the resources that are available," she added.

Sister Lucy welcomed Archbishop Dolan's pledge, saying the sisters have served 10,000 women since 1991 and have 10,000 volunteers "just waiting" to help women with jobs, housing, health care and financial and legal assistance.