

Bishop says Texas Catholic hospitals performed direct sterilizations

WASHINGTON - The bishop of Tyler, Texas, has concluded that Catholic hospitals in his diocese have violated ethical directives by performing sterilizations.

"As a bishop, I am deeply saddened and upset by this news," said Bishop Alvaro Corrada, in a Nov. 21 statement published in the Catholic East Texas, newspaper of the Diocese of Tyler. "As bishop of the Diocese of Tyler, I have to admit my failure to provide adequate oversight of the Catholic hospitals as regards their protection of the sacred dignity of each human person."

Bishop Corrada's statement follows an investigation by his diocese after a national Catholic newspaper reported claims last July that thousands of sterilizations, and possibly some abortions, took place in 23 Texas Catholic hospitals from 2000 to 2003.

Initially, officials from Trinity Mother Frances Hospital in Tyler and Christus St. Michael's Health System in Texarkana told the diocese they were in compliance with the U.S. Catholic Church's "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Services," he said in the statement.

"Sadly, subsequent investigation reveals that there had been a serious misinterpretation of the ERDs and that in fact many direct sterilizations had been done and continued to be done at the time of the article," Bishop Corrada said.

"In response to their own investigation of the matter, Christus St. Michael's in Texarkana has discontinued all tubal ligations. Prior to the release of the report, Trinity Mother Frances had experienced a 50 percent reduction in the number of tubal ligations," he said.

In a Dec. 1 statement, the bishop said he was grateful to Christus St. Michael's for its "timely action in stopping direct sterilization" and added that he was "hopeful

that Trinity Mother Frances in Tyler will soon follow suit.”

“Catholics who have counseled or participated in procedures contrary to the dignity of the human person should turn back to Christ and the sacrament of reconciliation,” he said.

The bishop also called on Catholic institutions that have followed policies against church teaching to “cease and issue public statements acknowledging the full extent of their failure and pledging to establish means by which they will ensure violations never happen again.”

The bishop stressed that “tubal ligation and other forms of direct sterilization ... treat no illness and serve only to destroy the reproductive capacity of a patient. They are elective procedures, not medically indicated or necessary for healing the patient. No one, especially a Catholic or a Catholic hospital, can be rightly compelled in the name of medicine to provide such procedures.”

Last July the newspaper, Our Sunday Visitor in Huntington, Ind., published an investigative story about the report on sterilizations released in June.

The report was made by a group of anonymous whistle-blowers who compiled hospital diagnostic and procedure codes and concluded there had been 9,684 instances of purported unequivocal “sterilization for contraceptive purposes” from 2000 to 2003.

The group, which Our Sunday Visitor said it contacted through an intermediary, also cited data indicating 39 abortions were performed at Catholic hospitals.

Group members noted, however, the data could be subject to interpretation because it could include morally acceptable procedures such as surgery to remove a baby that had died in the mother’s uterus or emergency services for an abortion performed at another location.

Bishop Corrada’s statement did not mention if his investigation found evidence of abortions being performed at the hospitals and telephone messages left with officials at Trinity Mother Frances Hospital and Christus St. Michael’s Health System by Catholic News Service Nov. 26 were not immediately answered.

John Haas, a moral theologian and president of the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, told Our Sunday Visitor in July that while U.S. bishops are “exercising far more ethical oversight of facilities than they have in the past,” there are widespread misunderstandings about the U.S. bishops’ ethical directives for health care facilities.

Mr. Haas said the misunderstanding was not “ill will, but just a shocking lack of understanding of the ethical principles and their application.”

“The church has approved the ‘Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Services’ as binding upon our Catholic hospitals to ensure the sacred dignity of each patient is protected and defended,” Bishop Corrada said.

“Many causes and complications have resulted in this unacceptable situation,” he said. “I continue to work directly with the Catholic hospitals in the Diocese of Tyler, and with my brother bishops in the state of Texas, to bring an end to immoral procedures and to put in place some method of ongoing accountability and transparency of monitoring both protocols and actual practices.”