

Brazil's Catholics defend archbishop's actions after girl's abortion

SAO PAULO, Brazil - A wave of indignation has swept across Brazil's Catholic community after a Vatican newspaper article criticized a Brazilian archbishop's actions relating to the case of an abortion performed on a 9-year-old rape victim.

In several Brazilian blogs and Catholic Web sites, the article's author, Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the Pontifical Academy for Life, was criticized for not knowing all the facts.

In addition, officials of the Archdiocese of Olinda and Recife, who participated in Archbishop Jose Cardoso Sobrinho's efforts to halt the abortion of twin fetuses, wrote a strongly worded statement rebutting Archbishop Fisichella's statements and defending their archbishop's actions. The text was signed by several archdiocesan officials, including the chancellor, vicar general and attorney as well as the parish priest of the town in which the girl lives.

In an article in the March 15 edition of L'Osservatore Romano, Archbishop Fisichella criticized what he called a "hasty" public declaration of the excommunication of the girl's mother and the doctors who aborted the girl's twins. The girl weighed a little more than 66 pounds and reportedly had been raped repeatedly by her stepfather from the time she was 6 years old.

Abortion in Brazil is illegal except in cases of rape or if the mother's life is in danger.

Archbishop Fisichella said the procedure was meant to save the girl's life. The archdiocese said doctors had established that the victim was not in immediate risk of losing her life if she continued with the pregnancy.

Archbishop Fisichella's article said that the girl "should have been defended, hugged and held tenderly to help her feel that we were all on her side."

The archdiocese rebutted the accusations and said that “all of us ... treated the pregnant girl and her family with extreme charity and tenderness. ... All efforts were focused on saving all three lives.”

The archdiocese said Archbishop Fisichella’s statement that it was “a difficult decision for the doctor and for the moral law itself” was untrue. “According to the church the moral law is exceedingly clear: It is never licit to eliminate the life of an innocent person to save another life,” said the archdiocese.

The statement called the article “a direct attack on the defense of the lives of the three children vehemently made by Archbishop Jose Cardoso Sobrinho and makes it clear how much the author does not have sufficient information to speak on the matter, due to his utter lack of knowledge on the facts.”

Others went further. Brother Luiz Carlos Lodi da Cruz, president of Anapolis Pro-Life, was quoted in a Catholic blog as saying that the article by Archbishop Fisichella did “incalculable harm to the pro-life cause.” Brother da Cruz called Archbishop Cardoso a hero.

While Recife archdiocesan priests voiced their opposition to the Vatican article, other religious officials in the country tried to offer some explanation for the controversial essay.

Father Berardo Graz, a priest of the Guarulhos Diocese, told a Brazilian news site, “I believe that Archbishop Fisichella wrote his article with information that he had received on the girl and the abortion conducted. If he had received more detailed and correct data he would not have written what he did.”

Bishop Fernando Areas Rifan, administrator of the Personal Apostolic Administration of Sao Joao Maria Vianney in Campos, told Catholic News Service by telephone that “Archbishop Fisichella was probably speaking from a more ‘pastoral’ point of view, and was exposing another side of the issue.”

Nonetheless, said Bishop Rifan, Archbishop Cardoso has the support of the church in Brazil.

“There is a great difference between being 10,000 kilometers (6,200 miles) from the

scene and being in the middle of the crisis," he said.

"The excommunication was done by the media." the bishop said. "Archbishop Cardoso only stated that such action was an infringement of canon law and punished automatically. He did not excommunicate anyone."

Bishop Rifan said he was saddened by the latest twists and turns of the case.

"Unfortunately, the only one who defended the two lives who were lost was the church," he said, adding, "In the end, these two voices were the only ones not to rise against the church and its members."