

Growing secularism seen as greatest threat facing health care workers

LITCHFIELD PARK, Ariz. - The greatest challenge faced by Catholic health care workers is growing secularism, said Los Angeles Archbishop Jose H. Gomez.

"This growing secularism endangers our religious freedom," he said Oct. 8, giving a keynote address that concluded the Oct. 6-8 Catholic Medical Association annual conference.

The archbishop noted the federal Department of Health and Human Services' mandate that health insurance plans cover contraception and sterilization.

"When we stop acknowledging our creator, we stop acknowledging who we are," Archbishop Gomez said. "Without God, we lose our ethics and the reason for human rights."

More than 300 Catholic health care professionals from across the United States attended the educational conference. The association's numbers are growing, according to the group's leadership, and medical students are joining its ranks.

The archbishop said Catholic health care workers' greatest responsibility is the sanctity of the human person.

"We're not just biological," he said, "our life is also theological."

During the conference, held in the Phoenix Diocese, speakers addressed Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted's decision to revoke St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center's status as a Catholic institution.

The Phoenix bishop's decision involved many factors, including an abortion performed at the hospital in late 2009. The hospital has stated that the abortion saved the life of the mother, who was suffering from pulmonary hypertension.

John Haas, president of the National Catholic Bioethics Center, said aborting the child violated the Ethical and Religious Directives issued by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

When the U.S. bishops' Committee on Doctrine took on the case - commonly referred to as "the Phoenix case" - many scholars asked the committee to change the directives, Haas said. The committee's statement, issued June 23, 2010, appeared to confirm Bishop Olmsted's evaluation that the procedure was a "direct abortion."

Bishop Robert F. Vasa of Santa Rosa, Calif., episcopal adviser of the Catholic Medical Association, said he was disappointed that the U.S. bishops haven't made a more public stand in support of Bishop Olmsted.

Bishop Olmsted said the medical association came out in strong support of his position from the beginning.

"As did individual members," he added. "They've been a great help, especially in helping others around the country to understand the decision as well."

A panel answered questions following an ethical, medical and canonical assessment of the Phoenix case. Panelists stressed that they only comment generally on the abortion and its aftermath.

"Ultimately, a Catholic hospital should let God play God, and not play God themselves," said Father John Ehrich, the association's chaplain and director of medical ethics for the Phoenix Diocese. "God is the only one who should determine life or death."

Dominican Sister Mary Diana Dreger, an internal medicine physician, spoke Oct. 7 on virtue in the practice of medicine.

"One of the noble joys of being a physician, which makes our profession uniquely different from being just another job, is that you could be a very good hair dresser or car mechanic or accountant without being a good person - you can do the art and science of your field," Sister Diana said.

“But in the field of medicine, you can’t really be a good doctor without being a good person – you are not just taking care of person’s parts but you are taking care of a person.”

Dr. John Brehany, executive director and ethicist for the association, spoke to participants about the basics of the Ethical and Religious Directives, better known as ERDs.

The purpose of the directives, Brehany said, is to “reaffirm the ethical standards of behavior in health care that flow from the Catholic Church’s teaching about the dignity of the human person.”

“A lot of people don’t understand that in order for their action to be good, it’s not enough that your motive is good, it’s not enough that you’re sincere,” he said. “Yes, your intention must be right, but so must the moral object and so must the circumstances.”

The battle over conscience rights has been ongoing, said Nik Nikas, president and general counsel of the Bioethics Defense Fund.

“When you stand for conscience,” Nikas said, “you are indicting others.” He told a story of a Catholic medical student who was mocked by his professor for stepping out during a sterilization procedure.

Alan Sears, CEO of the Alliance Defense Fund, lauded legislation recently passed in Arizona that limits and restricts the right to abortion. Religious communities are an essential part of the fabric of America, he said, and their rights of conscience must be protected.

“Those who are treated in Catholic hospitals and by people like you ... receive better care,” Sears said.

The Catholic Medical Association, organized by into chartered guilds throughout the United States, supports Catholic physicians in living out their faith.

“It’s very important that the doctors themselves know that there are doctors that share their convictions about the need to practice medical with the guidance of the

church,” Bishop Olmsted said. “That’s why these meetings are held every year – to give courage and new hope to them.”