

Nun excommunicated, loses hospital post over decision on abortion

PHOENIX - A nun who concurred in an ethics committee's decision to abort the child of a gravely ill woman at a Phoenix hospital was "automatically excommunicated by that action," according to Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix.

Mercy Sister Margaret Mary McBride also was reassigned from her position as vice president of mission integration at St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix after news surfaced about the abortion that took place late last year. The hospital did not say what her new job would be.

The patient, who has not been identified, was 11 weeks pregnant and suffering from pulmonary hypertension, a condition that the hospital said carried a near-certain risk of death for the mother if the pregnancy continued.

"If there had been a way to save the pregnancy and still prevent the death of the mother, we would have done it. We are convinced there was not," said a May 17 letter to Bishop Olmsted from top officials at Catholic Healthcare West, the San Francisco-based health system to which St. Joseph's belongs.

But the bishop said in a May 14 statement that "the direct killing of an unborn child is always immoral, no matter the circumstances, and it cannot be permitted in any institution that claims to be authentically Catholic."

"We always must remember that when a difficult medical situation involves a pregnant woman, there are two patients in need of treatment and care, not merely one," Bishop Olmsted said. "The unborn child's life is just as sacred as the mother's life, and neither life can be preferred over the other."

Sister Margaret, who has declined to comment on the controversy, was on an ethics committee that was called to decide whether doctors could perform an abortion to save the mother's life. Catholic institutions are guided in making such decisions by

the “Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services.”

Bishop Olmsted cited a section of the directives that reads: “Abortion (that is, the directly intended termination of pregnancy before viability or the directly intended destruction of a viable fetus) is never permitted. Every procedure whose sole immediate effect is the termination of pregnancy before viability is an abortion.”

But the Catholic Healthcare West officials, in their letter, asked Bishop Olmsted to clarify the directives, citing another section that reads: “Operations, treatments and medications that have as their direct purpose the cure of a proportionately serious pathological condition of a pregnant woman are permitted when they cannot be safely postponed until the unborn child is viable, even if they will result in the death of the unborn child.”

In a letter to the editor of The Arizona Republic May 18, Dr. John Garvie, chief of gastroenterology at St. Joseph’s, called Sister Margaret “the moral conscience of the hospital” and said “there is no finer defender of life at our hospital.”

“What she did was something very few are asked to do, namely, to make a life-and-death decision with the full recognition that in order to save one life, another life must be sacrificed,” Garvie said. “People not involved in these situations should reflect and not criticize.”

According to a brief biography posted on the hospital’s website, Sister Margaret “has 34 years of health care experience in both for-profit and not-for-profit health care management.” She holds a bachelor’s degree in nursing and a master’s in public administration, both from the University of San Francisco.

Bishop Olmsted said in his statement that any Catholic who “formally cooperates in the procurement of an abortion” is automatically excommunicated. “The Catholic Church will continue to defend life and proclaim the evil of abortion without compromise, and must act to correct even her own members if they fail in this duty,” he added.

The diocese also posted on its website a two-page statement by Father John Ehrich, medical ethics director for the diocese, on “Catholic morality and pregnant mothers

who are at risk.”

“The unborn child can never be thought of as a pathology or an illness,” the priest said. “That is, the child is not that which threatens the life of the mother, rather it is the pathology or illness (cancer, premature rupture of membranes, hypertension, preeclampsia, etc.) which threatens the mother’s life.”

Adding that “no physician can predict what will happen with 100 percent accuracy,” Father Ehrich said, “What we should not do ... is lower risks associated with pregnancy by aborting children. ... When we try to control every possible situation in life, we end up playing the role of God.”