

Pope says women often persuaded by others to have abortions

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI said that pregnant women facing difficulties due to their personal circumstances or to health issues of the fetus can be misled by doctors or people close to them into believing that abortion is the best solution.

And those who have undergone abortions often find themselves beset by serious psychological and spiritual problems from the “deep wound” that is the consequence of actions that “betray the innate vocation for human good,” the pope said.

Pope Benedict made his remarks at a Feb. 26 audience with participants in the 27th General Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life who met at the Vatican Feb. 24-26.

Members of the academy, doctors and bioethics experts discussed the results of months of study on the controversial subject of umbilical cord blood banking and on the phenomenon of post-abortion trauma.

The meeting was led by Bishop Ignacio Carrasco de Paula, who took over as president of the life academy in June 2010.

Pope Benedict said that doctors in particular are called upon to defend against those who “mislead” many women into “believing that abortion will be the answer to family, economic or social difficulties.”

Especially when the fetus is found to have health problems, women are often convinced, even by their doctors, “that abortion is not only a morally correct solution, but an obligatory ‘therapeutic’ act in order to spare the child and its family suffering” and avoid becoming an “unjust” burden to society, he said.

He said that pregnant women are often left alone, sometimes by the child’s father, as are those who have had an abortion and are dealing with negative psychological consequences. He urged more support for all women whose well being “can never, in any circumstance, find fulfillment by choosing abortion.”

Pope Benedict also addressed the issues around the growing use of umbilical cord blood to extract stem cells for use in medical research and therapy. He said that research and clinical use had been promising but urged that the technique be used ethically and for the common good.

He warned against the proliferation of umbilical cord blood banks where families store their children's cord blood for their personal use rather than donating it so it can be available for general access. Such private storage, he said, "weakens the genuine spirit of solidarity that should constantly accompany research for the common good."

At the meeting, Mercedes Arzu-Wilson, an author and a founding member of the academy, and Dr. Paul A. Byrne, neonatologist, pediatrician and former president of the Catholic Medical Association, presented a paper in which they warned of the danger of clamping the umbilical cord too early and too close to the baby in an effort to obtain a large quantity of cord blood. That blood is vital for the immediate functioning of the lungs and for the future development of the newly delivered baby; cutting the cord too soon sets the baby up for potential deficits in many areas, they said.

Another speaker at the meeting was American psychologist Theresa Burke, the founder of Rachel's Vineyard, a Pennsylvania-based organization that counsels women who have undergone abortion.

She told participants that many studies show that women who have had abortions have a significantly greater tendency to suffer depression, substance abuse and other psychological problems than women who have never terminated a pregnancy. She said that 46 million abortions were performed annually worldwide.

In opening the gathering Feb.24, Bishop Carrasco said that the academy was called upon to study extremely complex problems with scientific, technical, ethical, religious and moral aspects that require a "renewed commitment" and the ability to "look at the future with new eyes."

He said, "the challenge is great. We find ourselves in a world that is increasingly aggressive towards human life."

The academy will continue to study various issues in depth with experts from inside and outside the church, he said. The next topic under consideration by the academy is the progress made in infertility therapy that doesn't involve assisted reproductive technologies, the bishop said.