

Vatican urges measures to lessen number of maternal deaths

VATICAN CITY – The Vatican has urged the international community to implement social and health care measures to reduce what it called the “shocking” number of maternal deaths around the world.

Such improvements should include better access to antiretroviral medications by African mothers who are HIV-positive, said Archbishop Silvano Tomasi, the Vatican’s representative to U.N. agencies in Geneva. Introducing a minimum age of 18 years for marriage could also help reduce the maternal death rate, he said.

Archbishop Tomasi addressed a maternal mortality panel of the Human Rights Council in Geneva June 14. Experts estimate that 350,000-500,000 women die each year during or shortly after pregnancy.

Archbishop Tomasi noted that most maternal deaths occur in the developing world, and he said there was a strong correlation between maternal mortality and neonatal death. Each year, about 3 million babies die during their first week of life, 3 million are stillborn and another 2.3 million die during their first year of life, he said.

The Catholic Church has a long history of caring for mothers and newborns, especially through its hospitals and maternity and pediatric clinics, he said. The church takes a holistic approach that gives priority to the rights of mother and child, including the unborn, he said.

“Policies aimed at combating maternal mortality and child mortality need to strike a delicate balance between the rights of the mother and those of the child, both of whom are rights bearers, the first of which is the right to life,” he said.

He pointed to specific improvements that can be made in social and health sectors to prevent maternal deaths, including universal pre- and postnatal care, adequate transportation of medical facilities, skilled birth attendants, appropriate antibiotics, and clean blood and water supplies.

All these “are measures that could benefit both mothers and their children,” he said.

Most importantly, he added, if the international community wants to reduce maternal mortality rates, “respect for and promotion of the right to health and of access to medications must not only be spoken about, but also be put into action, by states as well as by nongovernmental organizations and by civil society.”