

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Save the mother or the baby?

11:48 AM PST, December 29, 2010

Q. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Phoenix, Ariz. has stripped St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center, also in Phoenix, of its Catholic affiliation for performing emergency surgery on a woman that saved the woman's life but ended her pregnancy, which was in its 11th week. The Church says that the hospital violated ethical and religious directives of the national Conference of Catholic Bishops and describe the operation as "an abortion." But the doctors involved said that if they hadn't operated, the mother would have lost her life, too. The ACLU has stepped in to demand that the federal government ensure that Catholic hospitals do not prevent women from receiving emergency medical procedures in cases such as this.

Do you think that religious beliefs take precedence in cases like this? Should the teachings of any religion supersede the need for emergency medical procedures?

And do you think that authorities, whether at local, state or federal level, should be allowed to force church-affiliated hospitals to perform surgical procedures that might result in the loss of a developing baby?

Answer:

My heart goes out to the young woman who is the focal point of this case and to St. Joseph's Hospital in Phoenix whose decision to end her pregnancy to save her life has made them subject to a directive by Catholic Bishop Olmstead removing their affiliation with the Catholic Church. I am also dismayed to learn that a nun who was a part of the hospital's ethical board has been excommunicated from the church because of her participation in the decision.

Unfortunately, all ethical problems are not as clear-cut as we would like and this seems to be one of these cases. If we were discussing a situation where only one life was in jeopardy, the medical directive to "do no harm" would clearly take precedence, But in a case of pregnancy, two lives are interdependent, making life-and-death decisions far more complex. And the issue of abortion, whatever our personal beliefs may be, obviously brings an emotion- and doctrine-laden component into the equation.

In this case, members of the hospital's medical team clearly felt that they could not save both the life of the mother and the baby, so they made the decision to end the young woman's early-term pregnancy so that at least one of the two could live. Clearly, they had evidence that the mother would not survive without their intervention and that if her life had not been protected, two lives would have been lost instead of one. The doctors and ethics committee decided that the best they could do was to cause the least harm.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I believe that when dogma gets in the way of our best thinking, we may well be sacrificing ourselves to narrow thinking and knee-jerk reactions and, in this case, the loss of two lives instead of one. The loss of any life is a great sorrow; but the loss of a life that could have been spared, such as that of the young woman in this case, is a tragedy. Let us hope that in the future clearer minds and hearts by people of faith will prevail in such decisions.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills

What a terrible dilemma for any family to endure. Our hearts go out to all the people involved. But looking at the bare facts, the St. Joseph's Hospital staff took a life in order to save a life. You could argue that if they hadn't, both lives would have been lost. But does that justify the deliberate act of terminating a baby's life? I don't believe it does. And certainly not when the hospital operates under the name of a church that has a clear pro-life position. Religious beliefs take precedence in cases like this. The Catholic Bishops were right to strip the hospital of its Catholic affiliation.

Few emergency medical procedures actually touch on major moral issues. And obviously it's morally right to heal people. Jesus asked: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or to do harm, to save a life, or to destroy it?" (Luke 6:9). It's unlawful in Jesus' view to destroy a life. It would be unlawful before God for federal authorities to order a church-affiliated hospital to perform abortions. It would also be a violation of our right to freedom of religious practice. These hospitals must be allowed to help people and never forced to harm them. Our culture must begin to understand that life in the human womb is human life. It's not a puppy, or a kitten or a toenail. It's a human being.

At Christmas we remember that Mary consented to the conception of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. He was born, lived a perfect holy life and offered that life on the cross for us all. Contrast that with Herod, who ordered that all the male children of Bethlehem be killed. Which one of them do we honor today? And how will history remember our culture — as those who affirm life at all costs or as those who destroy it for our convenience?

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

The thought comes to mind, "What is the will of God?" Unity World Wide Ministries (which includes the Silent Unity 24 Hour Prayer Ministry at Unity Village, Mo. and the publication, Daily Word) answers this question by stating: "The will of God is always for life, for wholeness and peace."

In this instance, it was an emergency with the mother's life seriously threatened. A quick decision had to be made and I support the doctor's decision to take all necessary steps to spare the mother's life.

No one wished that the 11-week-old fetus should perish; but if only one life could be saved, I support the decision that the mother should survive. Hopefully, she will be able to have another, healthy child in the future.

Prayer reveals that the will of God for life, wholeness and peace was expressed in and through all concerned. Any prayer treatment for divine-right action and compassionate judgment in this matter would be appropriate.

The Rev. Jeri Linn

Unity Church of the Valley, La Crescenta

What an incredibly thorny issue, and there may be no right answer. To begin with, as a progressive Protestant, I am not opposed to abortion. There are better forms of birth control, of course; but when it gets down to the nitty-gritty, I am pro-choice. I believe no government or no church official should force a woman either to give birth or to have an abortion.

As far as government stepping in to save the life of a woman in a Catholic hospital, part of me wants to say, "Do it!" But another part of me thinks this is a church-and-state issue, and I am definitely a supporter of church/state separation. So maybe the government does not have a right to force a Catholic hospital to do what the government believes is the right thing.

This issue reminds me of a topic that the In Theory crowd has commented on before: whether it matters what your doctor believes. In this case, it looks as though it matters very much what the doctor believes, and certainly what those who run the hospital believe. I personally think the Arizona hospital made the right decision in saving the life of the mother, but in doing so, it appears that the hospital went against what Roman Catholics believe generally. So it does not surprise me that the hospital's Catholic status has been withdrawn. But it's a sad case all around — sad because the hospital is being punished for doing what it thought was the right thing, and sad because those in power couldn't show a little flexibility in this situation.

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

As past vice-president and five-year board member of Avenues Pregnancy Clinic in Glendale, I have a very strong opinion on the issue of abortion. The question always comes down to this: "What is it?" Of course, it's always a human being, as human beings only conceive human beings. So the clinic serves as an alternative to killing the smallest human beings among us by providing medical attention and personal support for gals in crisis situations. But having a dim view of abortion doesn't mean I oppose abortive measures absolutely, and the case mentioned in this week's question is the primary exception that pro-life people in general will agree is justified.

St. Joseph's was between a rock and a hard place in this one, and some leniency ought to be forthcoming from the Roman Catholic credentialing committee. Whenever the difficult choice must be made between saving two lives balanced in this situation, the life of the mother takes precedence. Why? Because a grown woman is established; she is mother, wife, sister, aunt, niece, daughter, employee, etc., to the rest of the community. The woman is a solid fact.

The unborn, while an equally valuable human being, is a hopeful on-deck. If all goes right, the born child will take her first breath and go on to live a fruitful life, but 80,000 babies die annually before their first birthday, and most of those are preemies. Many don't make it through the delivery itself. Rather than possibly losing two lives, the doctors chose the best survival candidate for their saving efforts. Their religious convictions may preclude elective abortions, as do mine, but this was no convenience, this was a genuine emergency. They are accountable to God, and I am confident they did good.

If an ethic is believed to be divine, what should rightfully interfere with its expression, the government? Do we want the feds forcing rejection of God's will upon any institution? I would advise the ACLU to stay out of it, the federal government to watch itself, and the Catholic Diocese to repent.

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church

Editor's note: This is a corrected version of the article. The original question stated the emergency surgery took place in the 12th week of the woman's pregnancy.