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Phoenix hospital to continue 'faithful mission'

Joshua J. McElwee | Dec. 22, 2010

A statue of St. Joseph and the Christ Child is seen in 2009 outside the entrance of St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix. (CNS)

Despite losing its designation as a Catholic hospital yesterday, St. Joseph?s Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix says its day-to-day functions will continue as before.

Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix withdrew the Catholic designation from the hospital because of a dispute over whether a procedure performed at the hospital last year was a direct abortion.

?St. Joseph?s will continue through our words and deeds to carry out the healing ministry of Jesus,? Linda Hunt, President of St. Joseph?s said in a statement on the hospital?s Web site. ?Our operations, policies, and procedures will not change.?

?Though we are deeply disappointed, we will be steadfast in fulfilling our mission,? Hunt said. ?St. Joseph?s hospital will remain faithful to our mission of care, as we have for the last 115 years."

A statement released by Olmsted following his announcement yesterday that St. Joseph?s can no longer ?utilize in any way the name ?Catholic?? says the hospital will no longer be able to celebrate Mass and will be prohibited from keeping the Blessed Sacrament in its chapel.

In its statement, the hospital said it ?will not change its name or its mission.?

On a Web page responding to frequently asked questions about Olmsted?s announcement, St. Joseph?s said, that going forward, it will:

- Retain its name;
- Remove the Blessed Sacrament from the its chapel and not celebrate Mass there;
- Begin to use its chapel as ?a place for people to find a quiet, prayerful place within the hospital for prayer and reflection;?
- Continue its policy of not allowing elective abortions or sterilizations;

- Continue its relationship with the Mercy Sisters, who founded the hospital and minister there;
- Continue to accept Catholic patients;
- Continue to allow priests to visit patients and offer the sacraments in their rooms;
- Keep a statue of St. Joseph that stands outside its front entrance.

In an e-mail response to *NCR* yesterday, Edward N. Peters, a professor of canon law at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, said Olmsted?s decision to remove the hospital?s Catholic status fell within the bounds of his authority as bishop.

Wrote Peters: ?It?s up to the bishop to declare on the authenticity of the claims by individual[s] or groups to be Catholic.?

Yet, Peters also noted that the hospital will be able to appeal the decision if it chooses.

?If an individual or a group feels itself aggrieved by a bishop?s decision in their regard, canon law provides mechanisms by which the bishop?s determination can be reviewed by higher authority,? wrote Peters.

Another canon lawyer, speaking on background to *NCR* Dec. 20, said the success of such an appeal to the Vatican would hinge on the interpretation of Canons 216 and 300 of the Code of Canon Law, which leave the assignment of the term ?Catholic? to the ?competent ecclesial authority.?

The canonist said they believed that Olmsted is ?quite within his competence? as bishop.

If, on appeal, the Vatican stepped in and changed Olmsted?s decision, ?it would violate an important principle of law and of church governance, that the one who is on the scene is the one who is most likely [to know] the situation best,? said the canonist.

?That doesn?t mean that the Congregation [reviewing the case] couldn?t say that in making a certain decision a bishop violated the law?[but] frankly, I see no space for that finding in this particular case.?

St. Joseph?s is run by the Sisters of Mercy and is part of San Francisco-based Catholic Healthcare West, a system of 41 hospitals, mainly Catholic, in Arizona, California and Nevada.

On ?the facts of the case? which caused the dispute between the hospital and the bishop, the hospital said in its FAQ:

> ?A woman in her 20s with a history of moderate but well-controlled pulmonary hypertension found out she was pregnant. There was concern for her health because pregnancy with pulmonary hypertension carries a serious risk of mortality. Because of the severity of her disease, the woman?s risk of mortality was close to 50 percent. In November 2009 the woman was admitted to St. Joseph?s Hospital and Medical Center with worsening symptoms. Tests revealed that she now had life-threatening pulmonary hypertension. The chart notes that she had been informed that her risk of mortality was close to 100 percent if she continued the pregnancy. The medical team contacted the Ethics Consult team for review. The consultation team talked to several physicians and nurses as well as reviewed the patient?s record. The patient and her family, her doctors and the Ethics Consult team agreed that the pregnancy could be terminated, and that it was appropriate since the goal was not to end the pregnancy but save the mother?s life.?

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Dec. 22: **Phoenix hospital to continue 'faithful mission'** [1]

Dec. 22: **Catholic Health Association backs Phoenix hospital** [2]

Dec. 21: **Phoenix bishop removes hospital's Catholic status** [3]

Dec. 16 and 17: **Phoenix bishop gives ultimatum to hospital** [4].

For Olmsted's full statement, **click here** [5] for a PDF file.

For a copy of Olmsted's official decree removing the hospital's Catholic status, **click here** [6].

For a copy of the bishop's letter of demands to the hospital, **click here** [7] for a PDF file.

For the hospital's full statement, **click here** [8] for a PDF file.

For the hospital's answers to frequently asked questions about Bishop Olmsted's announcement, **click here** [9] for a PDF file.

For more information on the Phoenix hospital and Bishop Olmsted, see our previous stories:

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