

Dioceses question major breast cancer nonprofit

Zoe Ryan | Oct. 25, 2011



Runners begin the annual Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure in St. Louis on June 11. (Newscom/UPI/Bill Greenblatt)

October is Respect Life Month and National Breast Cancer Awareness Month. But a Susan G. Komen for the Cure pink ribbon may not go well with baby feet pins on some sweaters.

About a dozen Catholic dioceses have made declarations to notify area Catholics that they, as dioceses, "do not support" the Susan G. Komen for the Cure organization, a nonprofit breast cancer awareness group. The dioceses say that certain positions of the organization go against church teaching, a charge that other Catholics and the Komen organization contest.

The church statements do not condemn the organization nor ban individual Catholics from participating in its events, but they don't encourage participation.

The Susan G. Komen for the Cure organization began in 1982. It has raised \$1.9 billion since it began and is the world's largest source of nonprofit funds for eradicating breast cancer, according to its website. The For the Cure races have been going on since 1983.

Around 2005, Catholic dioceses started making the news when they issued statements or editorials objecting to some of Komen's funding practices. It's not clear why position statements started then.

Most recently, the Ohio Catholic Conference issued a position paper in July about a discussion the bishops had after being asked by Catholics about Komen. They met to see how other bishops approached the issue and agreed to "direct Catholic parishes and schools away from fundraising" for Komen and toward organizations that do not go against Catholic moral teaching.

Other dioceses that currently have statements that say they do not support the Komen organization are St. Louis; Lafayette-in-Indiana, Ind.; Charleston, S.C.; Phoenix; and Baltimore. The North Dakota Catholic Conference includes the Komen organization on a list of organizations it suggests that Catholics do not donate to.

If they don't support Komen, dioceses list breast cancer organizations that they do support.

Some dioceses *NCR* contacted once took positions (either not supporting or OK'ing support for Komen) but over the years because of change in personnel or bishop, currently have no official active policy on it. Other dioceses contacted may have similar suggestions but no statement on the matter.

The ways this reaches the diocesan level differ. Sometimes it is a school or parish looking for approval to participate in a For the Cure race. Sometimes it is a Komen affiliate asking if it can reach out to parishes and schools. Sometimes it's calls from individual Catholics. The diocese then looks into the matter.

While the dioceses commend the work of the organization to eradicate breast cancer, they typically bring up three issues that make it not possible for them to support it now:

- Komen is not opposed to the possibility of embryonic stem cell research;
- Some local Komen affiliates give money to the local Planned Parenthood Federation of America chapter, a nonprofit that provides reproductive health services, including abortions;
- The organization dismisses a connection between abortion and breast cancer.
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Some dioceses only list two of the three reasons.

The Komen organization has been addressing these objections since they started. Its president, Liz Thompson, said that Komen has never funded and does not intend to fund embryonic stem cell research.



Both sides of the issue cite scientific studies about a link between abortion

and breast cancer. Some dioceses cite studies that show a link or say that there's a lot more research to be done in the field, so one must not prematurely dismiss a link. Thompson said the Komen organization cites studies showing that scientists can't find a link and say that studies that show a link aren't comprehensive.

The national Komen organization does not give money to Planned Parenthood, but a few local affiliates do give grants, Thompson said. They have a "rigorous review process" to make sure all money goes to breast screening services, she said.

That's usually what dioceses object to: that a few affiliates give money to Planned Parenthood. Although they commend Komen's work with breast cancer, a few affiliates partnering with Planned Parenthood taints Komen's reputation, one diocese said.

According to a Komen statement, the affiliates "fund programs that provide breast health education and breast screenings for hundreds of thousands of low-income, uninsured, or medically underserved women via nearly 2,000 local organizations, including 19 Planned Parenthood programs."

Komen, being a nonprofit, can only make grants to nonprofits. According to a 2011 statement, since "many

mammography providers are for-profit entities, we are only to fund mammography services through grants made to local nonprofit service providers? who then refer people to the mammography providers.

Some still have concerns that even if one affiliate does not give money to Planned Parenthood, it's still a part of the larger organization with affiliates that do, or that money earmarked for breast services could "free up" money for abortions, or that just by having the connection it's an "indirect cooperation to an evil going on," said Mike Phelan, director of the Marriage and Respect Life Office for the Phoenix diocese.

Komen also gives grants to many organizations, including Catholic agencies. To date, it has given \$17.5 million in grants to a Catholic Charities, Catholic hospital, health center, multicultural center, medical centers and Georgetown University in Washington.

Komen and some Catholics assert that one can be Catholic and support the organization.

Komen lists on its website a guide to "Cooperating with Philanthropic Organizations," written in 2008 by two Catholic health professionals, and a narrative titled "A pro-life Catholic supports Komen."

Thompson said that Komen has a "long-standing and wonderful relationship with the Catholic church." Among other things, Komen CEO Nancy Brinker (who was U.S. chief of protocol 2007-2009), founder of the organization and sister to Susan Komen, met the pope, who blessed a basket of pink ribbons in 2008.

The Alexandria, La., diocese published a column, "Is it OK to participate in the Susan G. Komen race despite its link to Planned Parenthood?" in the Sept. 19 issue of its newspaper, *The Church Today*. Editor Jeannie Petrus, an ovarian cancer survivor and a "strong supporter of pro-life issues," wrote the column, coming to the conclusion, after hours researching "with the help of the Internet, interviews with SGK Race organizers, hospital officials, priests and our bishop," that people could support that particular Komen affiliate because none of the funds were given to Planned Parenthood.

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