

Abortion rift divides bishops, Catholic hospitals

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [January 25, 2011](#) issue

An umbrella group of Catholic hospitals is backing a Phoenix hospital that was stripped of its church affiliation, thereby setting the stage for another sharp conflict between the hierarchy and Catholic health-care providers.

Sister Carol Keehan, president of the Catholic Health Association, said St. Joseph's Hospital and Medical Center "correctly applied" church guidelines in late 2009 when it terminated the pregnancy of a dangerously ill woman. Catholic Healthcare West, the parent company for St. Joseph's, is a member of the CHA, which represents more than 620 hospitals and 60 health-care systems in the U.S.

"They had been confronted with a heartbreaking situation," Keehan said in a statement, adding that the hospital saved "the only life that was possible to save."

During the heat of the congressional battles over health-care reform, Keehan and the CHA had backed Democratic leaders and President Obama in seeking passage of the reform over the fierce objections of U.S. bishops, who argued that the new law allows funding of elective abortions.

Because Catholic Healthcare West operates in several dioceses, the conflict may well expose fissures between bishops who take a hard line on Catholic doctrine and those more willing to compromise, according to church scholars.

"Health care seems to be the fault line developing between the bishops and within wider society," said Steven Avella, a Catholic priest and professor of religious history at Marquette University in Milwaukee.

An Oregon bishop announced last February that he terminated the church affiliation of a large medical center, saying it had abandoned Catholic ethical guidelines. In April, the bishop of Providence, Rhode Island, demanded that the state's only Catholic hospital quit the CHA over the group's support of the health-care bill.

Rusty Reno, a senior editor at the conservative journal *First Things*, said such conflicts are likely to continue as Catholic health care follows the lead of its secular counterparts.

"The bishops recognize they have a problem, which is that you have a health-care system that calls itself Catholic, but refuses to conform to Catholic principles," he said.

The Phoenix controversy centers on a Catholic mother who agreed to terminate her pregnancy in November 2009 after doctors at St. Joseph's told her that she and the baby would likely die if the pregnancy continued, according to the hospital.

On December 21 last year, Phoenix bishop Thomas Olmsted revoked the hospital's official church affiliation, which means that St. Joseph's can no longer call itself Catholic, celebrate mass on its premises or keep consecrated communion wafers in its chapel.

Olmsted decreed that he could no longer verify that the Phoenix hospital provides health care consistent with "authentic Catholic moral teaching." The bishop said it was his duty to remove the Catholic identity from the hospital and from San Francisco-based Catholic Healthcare West.

After the bishop's announcement, Linda Hunt, president of St. Joseph's, said she was "deeply disappointed" by the decision. But, she added, the hospital would "continue through our words and deeds to carry out the healing ministry of Jesus."

Olmsted had asked the hospital to admit it was wrong to terminate the pregnancy, to grant him greater oversight to ensure compliance with Catholic doctrine and to teach medical staff about the bishops' guidelines.

Officials at St. Joseph have refused to admit wrongdoing. "Had there been a way to save both the mother and the fetus, we would have done it," the hospital said in a statement. "We are convinced there was not. We would do the same thing again."

St. Joseph's, which was founded by Sisters of Mercy in 1895, said it "will continue to operate in the Catholic tradition," but will obey Olmsted's directives about mass and communion wafers. —RNS