Church-State Conflict Erupts Again with Approval of Morning-After Pill

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by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2004-02-11

The bitter conflict between church and state erupted again in late January after the federal government approved the use of the so-called morning-after pill as part of its revised family-planning policy Norma Oficial Mexicana de los Servicios de Planificacion Familiar. The 60-page document, published in the government's daily register (Diario Oficial de la Federacion), says the use of the pill as a contraceptive is recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) in its family-planning guides. The pill can be taken within 72 hours of sexual intercourse to prevent pregnancy. It contains the same hormones as normal birth-control pills but in a higher dosage.

The government's decision to endorse the drug was the result of an agreement between health authorities and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The pill may be included in the basket of basic medications offered to the public, said Guillermo Salomon Santibanez, director of medications and technology at the Secretaria de Salud (SSA). "This is a big step forward, because now public-health clinics will be able to prescribe this drug to all women who need it...and more rape victims may come forward for treatment," said Dora Patricia Mercado Castro, president of the Mexican women's rights organization Diversa.

Catholic bishops threaten to excommunicate users

The Mexican Catholic Bishops' Conference (Conferencia del Episcopado Mexicano, CEM) has taken the opposite stance, condemning President Vicente Fox administration's promotion of the pill as contrary to the church's teachings. "Although they are called contraceptives, when they produce an abortion that's called murder, and it is not permitted to murder an innocent person," said Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera, archbishop of Mexico.

Rivera has even threatened to excommunicate anyone who uses or promotes the use of the pill. "All government authorities should respect human life," said the cardinal. "This is not optional, this is a fundamental human right that every government official should respect."

The Catholic Church and the government have maintained an uneasy relationship for many generations, with tensions especially difficult between some bishops and the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). The PRI-church conflict was especially apparent in the aftermath of the uprising by the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas (see SourceMex, 1997-11-12 and 2001-01-19).

The PRI and the Catholic Church have also faced off in a bitter war of words over the assassination of Guadalajara Cardinal Juan Jose Posadas Ocampo in May 2003. The government claims Posadas was caught in the cross fire in a shootout between drug gangs. Church officials dispute that theory, instead accusing the administration of former President Carlos Salinas de Gortari of murdering Posadas (see SourceMex, 2001-06-13).
At the center of the Posadas controversy is former attorney general Jorge Carpizo McGregor and Posadas' successor, Guadalajara Cardinal Juan Sandoval Iniguez. Sandoval has accused Carpizo of covering up evidence. Carpizo, in turn, has not only denied the charges but also has accused Sandoval of money laundering and involvement with drug cartels (see SourceMex, 2003-01-01). Late last year, Carpizo succeeded in convincing the Fox administration to look into the charges.

Early this year, the Procuraduria General de la Republica (PGR) exonerated Sandoval after conducting an exhaustive investigation. Other political parties have also recently come into conflict with the Mexican Catholic Church. Just before the 2003 midterm elections, the tiny Partido Mexico Posible (PMP) created a ruckus after it accused Mexican bishops of violating Mexican election laws by using the pulpit to denounce the PMP's positions. The PMP's charges gained some support from the PRI and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), which urged the bishops to stay out of politics (see SourceMex, 2003-06-04).

Many PAN members also oppose bishops

The latest controversy about the morning-after pill has placed the Catholic bishops at odds with several members of Fox's center-right Partido Accion Nacional (PAN). The PAN, which has been the Catholic Church's closest ally, has taken a socially conservative position on many issues.

But many members of the party have criticized the church for involving itself in matters that pertain to the state. "[The Catholic Church] should stay outside the public arena," said Deputy German Martinez Caceres, one of the PAN floor leaders in the lower house. "The state should be in charge of defending earthly matters, while matters relating to 'heaven' should be left for individuals to address personally with their God."

The church counters Martinez's argument by noting that the Mexican Constitution contains language that ensures protection of human life. "The high court [Suprema Corte de Justica de la Nacion, SCJN] itself has declared that Mexican laws favor human life from the moment of conception," said Cardinal Rivera. "Anyone who wants to go against the Constitution does so at his own risk."

Several public-opinion polls suggest that the positions of the Catholic Church often do not resonate with the Mexican public, especially in matters of sexuality. In a recent survey by Encuesta de Opinion Catolica en Mexico, 90% of respondents said the government should offer condoms and contraceptives to the public free of charge. This survey, sponsored by Catolicas por el Derecho a Decidir, was based on more than 2,300 interviews among Catholics throughout Mexico.

In the same poll, 82% of respondents said the government should protect itself from the influence of the Catholic Church, while 18% said the church's opinion should have more of a bearing on public policy. The findings are compatible with those published in 2003 by Estadistica Aplicada, which found that 76% of respondents supported the distribution of contraceptives at hospitals and clinics.

Still, the bishops' position on the morning-after pill has found support among some organizations like Pro-Vida and Union Nacional de Padres de Familia (UNPF). "If we don't defend life at all
times, then we will become a genocidal nation like the United States and those in Europe," said Pro-Vida director Rocio Galvez, referring to countries where abortion is legal. UNPF director Guillermo Bustamante Manilla said his organization would exhaust all legal means to force the Fox administration to reverse its decision to allow and promote the use of the morning-after pill.

**Opinions differ on whether pill is abortive**

There are divisions within the PAN on the nature of the morning-after pill. Key officials, including party president Luis Felipe Bravo Mena, have promised to support studies on the effects of the morning-after pill. "If this is an abortive pill, the PAN will never support it," said Bravo Mena.

But some high-level SSA officials emphasize that the pill is not abortive. "The findings are not ours," said Patricia Uribe, director of the SSA's Centro Nacional de Equidad y Genero y Salud Reproductiva. "The scientific evidence presented by international bodies like the WHO indicate that [the use of the pill] is not equivalent to an abortion."

Uribe also emphasized that the pill is totally different from the RU-486 pill, which is designed to end a pregnancy and can be taken up to 12 weeks after conception. She said RU-486 pills are not legal in Mexico. The PRD and legislators from the PRI have also denounced what they consider the Catholic Church's interference in matters pertaining to family planning. "We cannot allow that modern civil and human rights be superseded by moral norms and pre-modern prejudices," said a statement from the PRD leadership.

An organization of PRI women, Organismo Nacional de Mujeres del PRI (ONMPRI), has also endorsed the use of the morning-after pill. In a statement, the group raised special concerns about the large number of clandestine abortions that take place in Mexico. PRI Sen. Lucero Saldana Perez said the Fox administration should take care to promote the morning-after pill only as an emergency measure and not as a regular contraceptive. "This pill does not protect against AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases," said Saldana.

Elena Zuniga, director of the Consejo Nacional de Poblacion (CONAPO), said the approval of the morning-after pill is compatible with the evolution of Mexico's family-planning policies, which have been in place since 1974. Zuniga said the implementation of the policy has resulted in a decrease of 20% in birth rates over the past 30 years. "Without these policies, our population growth could have doubled every 20 years," said Zuniga. "Our population at this point would have been 168 million instead of our current 104 million." (Sources: The Dallas Morning News, 01/28/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 01/28/04, 01/29/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/08/04, 01/29/04, 02/02/04, 02/05/04, 02/09/04; La Jornada, 01/29/04, 01/30/04, 02/02/04, 02/04/04, 02/05/04; El Financiero, 01/09/04, 01/29/04, 02/04/04, 02/05/04/04, 02/09/04; El Sol de Mexico, 01/08/04, 01/29/04, 02/02/04, 02/03/04, 02/05/04, 02/09/04; Milenio Diario, 01/08/04, 02/09/04; Notimex, 01/07/04, 02/04/04, 02/05/04, 02/08/04, 02/09/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 01/07/04, 01/29/04, 02/02/04, 02/08/04, 02/10/04; Unomasuno, 01/15/04, 01/29/04, 02/02/04, 02/05/04, 02/09/04, 02/11/04; El Universal, 01/29/04, 01/30/04, 02/02/04, 02/03/04, 02/05/04, 02/06-08/04, 02/11/04)

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