

'Morning-After' Pills Find Some Favor With German Catholic Church

Germany's Catholic Church may approve some so-called morning-after pills for rape victims after a leading cardinal unexpectedly announced they did not induce abortions and could be used in Catholic hospitals.

Cardinal Joachim Meisner of Cologne, an ally of German-born Pope Benedict, changed his policy after two Catholic hospitals refused to treat a rape victim because they could not prescribe the pill, which is taken after sex to avoid pregnancy.

The Catholic Church firmly opposes **abortion** and artificial birth control. Many Catholics see all emergency contraceptives as abortion-inducing drugs banned by this policy, but Meisner said some prevent fertilization and could be used in rape cases.

"The German Bishops' Conference is holding a regular meeting in two weeks and the issue will certainly be on the agenda," Cologne archdiocese spokeswoman Nele Harbeke said on Monday.

"The bishops' conference must in principle agree on a common line."

Meisner, 79, has in the past rejected emergency contraceptives as producing a "just-in-case abortion".

The pills have become a hot issue in the United States as many Catholics oppose President Barack Obama's health reform in part because it mandates Catholic hospitals to provide birth control for female employees.

One pill, marketed as "Plan B" in the United States and based

on the synthetic hormone levonorgestrel, is rejected by these critics as an abortifacient, but might meet Meisner's criteria.

The Cologne incident sparked uproar in Germany last month and the cardinal apologised publicly, saying it "shames us deeply because it contradicts our Christian mission and our purpose".

Conservative Views

Meisner's change of mind made headlines because he is known for his outspoken conservative views. The surprise was compounded when another conservative, Berlin Archbishop Rainer Woelki, urged the Church to debate the issue.

Meisner said he had changed his view after learning from scientists that some newer pills did not abort fertilized eggs but rather prevented fertilization altogether.

"If a medication that hinders conception is used after a rape with the purpose of avoiding fertilization, then this is acceptable in my view," he said.

His office stressed in an accompanying statement that this exception was valid only in rape cases and not within Catholic marriage, where artificial contraception is banned.

It also said there was no change to the ban on the so-called abortion pill, based on the drug mifepristone or RU-486, and marketed as Mifegyne or Mifeprex.

Harbeke said Meisner had consulted the Vatican as well as a 2009 directive for Catholic hospitals in the United States that says a rape victim "may be treated with medications that would prevent ovulation, sperm capacitation or fertilization".

That directive by the U.S. bishops' conference does not name the Plan B pill – marketed elsewhere as Levonelle, NorLevo, Postinor-2 or Optinor – which some U.S. Catholic hospitals use and others do not, depending on their reading of Church

teaching.

The German Catholic Hospitals' Association hailed Meisner's statement for spelling out what they can do for rape victims.

"We are still against the abortion pill," association official Thomas Vortkamp told Cologne's Catholic broadcaster Domradio. "But it helps to know we can give a 'morning-after pill' in cases of raped women who must be helped urgently."

Reporting By Tom Heneghan; Editing by Kevin Liffey