

Should Doctors Serve God or Patients?

In April this year, a pregnant woman asked Professor Bogdan Chazan, director of Warsaw's Holy Family Hospital, for an abortion because her own physician had diagnosed her unborn child with grave health problems.

Chazan sent the woman a letter saying he could not agree to an abortion in his hospital because of a "conflict of conscience," and instead gave the woman the address of a hospice where, he said, the child could get palliative care once born.

The baby was born at a different hospital with, according to a doctor there, severe head and facial deformities and a brain that was not viable, conditions which the doctor said would result in the child's death within a month or two.

The event has stirred a new battle in a long-running war in staunchly Catholic Poland between conservatives and liberals over abortion, which along with homosexuality, contraception and in vitro fertilization, is defined by the church as sinful.

On Wednesday, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, the mayor of the Polish capital, said she was firing Chazan from the hospital on the grounds that he did not have the right to refuse the abortion and did not inform the woman about the options for getting a termination.

The case has added resonance because Chazan was one of 3,000 doctors and medical students who this year signed a "Declaration of Faith" affirming the Catholic church's teaching that all human life is sacred from the moment of conception.

"The sole basis for the dignity and freedom of a Catholic physician is a conscience enlightened by the Holy Spirit," said the declaration, which was unveiled at a Catholic shrine in the form of a stone tablet, a nod to the Old Testament's Ten Commandments.

Chazan has become a hero for devout Catholics, who say he is defending traditional values that are being eroded, and a focus of anger from liberals who say doctors' first obligation is to patients, not to the church's teaching.

Cardinal Kazimierz Nycz, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Warsaw, said in a statement he supported Chazan. He said the dismissal was a "dangerous precedent, violating the rights not only of Catholics but of all people."

Natural Laws

In Poland, which prides itself on being the birthplace of newly canonized Pope John Paul II, abortion is allowed if there is a threat to the mother's life, if the fetus is seriously ill or if the pregnancy is the result of rape.

Polish law gives doctors some leeway to refuse to carry out an abortion themselves for reasons of conscience, but it requires them to help the patient find alternative options for having a termination.

An inquiry commissioned by the mayor's office alleged that Chazan flouted that rule, that he did not inform the patient an abortion would be illegal after the 24th week of pregnancy, and ordered unnecessary tests which made her miss that deadline.

Chazan does not deny that he refused to carry out an abortion, but disputed the findings of the inquiry. His lawyer said Chazan may appeal against his dismissal.

"Today's decision is the start of an attack on the conscience

of doctors and people in management positions in the health service, it is a violation of their conscience,” Chazan said in an interview with , a conservative news portal.

“Abiding by the laws of nature, and first and foremost by the law that prohibits killing a person, will probably become a reason for eliminating these people from management positions.”

Professor Romuald Debski is a doctor at the Bielanski hospital, where the child whose termination Chazan refused to carry out was born. Debski has said doctors’ guiding principle should be the Hippocratic oath, not their faith.

“If Professor Chazan saw the life that he saved, he would have a different attitude,” Debski told the TVN24 television station earlier this month.

“This child does not have half of its head, has a hanging eyeball, its face is split, it has no brain inside and will be dying for a month or two thanks to the professor.” (Additional reporting by Anna Sterczynska and Joanna Kozłowska; Writing by Christian Lowe; editing by Ralph Boulton)