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January 27, 2011: It is not Pro-Life to Kill a Woman

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Title: It is not Pro-Life to Kill a Woman

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1/27/2011—I'm not sure why I only now am learning about the denouement of the abortion performed by St. Joseph's Hospital, a formerly Catholic affiliated hospital in Phoenix. The hospital performed the abortion, which is not the term used by the hospital, in 2009, after doctors at the hospital determined that continuing the pregnancy would endanger the life of the mother. According to USA Today, the doctors estimated the risk to her life at "nearly 100%". On December 22, 2010, Bishop Thomas Olmsted removed the hospital's affiliation with the Church and stated that any Catholic formally involved in the decision is "automatically excommunicated". To an outsider, these decisions seem ludicrous. Looked at more closely, the Bishop's objection is coherent, if legalistic. But it is still wrong. The Bishop was not objecting that the fetus died in the course of treatments to save the life of the mother. But such a death can only be justified as a secondary effect of a treatment aimed at saving her life. Bishop Olmstead characterized the hospital's decision as "directly" killing the fetus in order to save the mother's life, rather than treating the woman, which might well have killed the unborn child. But if this was indeed the ground of the decision, there is something gravely wrong with the Church's teaching on abortion. It is true that in American law, one may not take one life in order to save another, such as killing one person so that several other starving people would have something to eat. But in this case, the unborn child was only 11 weeks old. It was not even a case in which either the child or the mother had to be sacrificed and the hospital chose the mother. The death of the mother insured the death of the child anyway. So failing to end the life of the child would have merely led to the death of both. The Church's position is that after conception, the unborn child is fully human and is fully equal in dignity to the mother. That is a position I have trouble accepting or even taking seriously. But even that view of the unborn child should not have led the Bishop to condemn the hospital for taking the only action that could save any life.