

Vatican board asked to resign over conference

May 9 2012, By NICOLE WINFIELD , Associated Press

(AP) -- Members of the Vatican's bioethics advisory panel have called for its board to resign after scientists who don't support core church teaching on issues like birth control and infertility were featured at its annual conference.

The members said the Pontifical Academy of Life's Feb. 24 conference on diagnosing and treating infertility was a "Planned Parenthood-like meeting" that caused great scandal. They were upset because it was a Vatican meeting open to the public yet "consisted in promoting uncritically what the church teaches to be intrinsically bad."

Church teaching opposes in vitro fertilization because it separates conception from intercourse between husband and wife, and often results in the destruction of embryos. The Vatican also opposes artificial contraception, holding that life begins at conception.

In the past, the academy has tended to invite only like-minded professionals to speak at its conferences, ensuring that its proceedings, papers and discussions reflect church teaching. Members say this is designed to give the faithful the best in scientific information that is in-line with Catholic doctrine.

Under the academy's new head, Monsignor Ignacio Carrasco de Paula, there seems to be a new openness however to engage with non-likeminded scientists while holding true to church teaching on the need to defend life from conception until natural death.

Josef Seifert, an academy member who is rector of the International Academy of Philosophy in Liechtenstein, wrote a letter May 4 to Carrasco suggesting that the Pontifical Academy's board resign. He cited the "enormous concern" of several members that the academy was "losing its full and pure commitment to the truth and its enthusiastic service to the unreduced magnificent church teaching on human life in its whole splendor."

The letter, first reported by the Catholic News Agency, said five of the first seven presentations dealt with the pill, [artificial insemination](#) and in-vitro fertilization from a purely neutral standpoint, neglecting any moral references.

"This alone is a great evil for a public congress sponsored by (the academy) because a neutral scientific description of methods of infertility treatment has absolutely no place in our academy, which was explicitly founded to deal with these matters in the light of anthropological, theological and moral truth," he wrote.

The Rev. Scott Borgman, the academy's coordinating secretary, said the academy was aware of the concerns reflected in Seifert's letter and was working to move forward. But in a telephone interview with The Associated Press, Borgman stressed that the academy's work also aimed at "creating dialogue with science and not closing ourselves off."

"Most of the members are congruous with the vision of the academy, which is able to understand at once what we believe, and hear other viewpoints knowing that we don't sustain or promote viewpoints which go against truth and the defense of human life from conception until natural death," he said.

He stressed that the academy was a scientific research institution "open to dialogue with the scientific world."

The academy is made up of its Vatican-based secretariat and a membership of Catholic medical doctors, philosophers, clergy and bioethicists from across the globe. It was founded by Pope John Paul II in 1994 to promote and defend human life and it serves as a key bioethical advisory board for the Vatican.

To some degree, the dispute reflects an apparent difference in vision between the secretariat and the more hard-core pro-life members.

But in another, it reflects a broader tension within the church over Pope Benedict XVI's aim to emphasize traditional Catholic identity in everything from Catholic universities to religious orders, while at the same time encouraging dialogue with scientists and even atheists. Some think you can't do both, and that the church merely creates confusion by engaging in such dialogue.

Christine de Vollmer, a founding member of the academy and president of the Latin American Alliance for the Family, said many academy members say the academy's current leadership isn't acting in line with what John Paul envisaged.

"It's clearly not in our statutes to bring up and re-study issues of human life that have already been decided," she said in a phone interview from her home in Caracas, Venezuela.

The statutes do allow for collaboration with non-Catholic and non-Christian scientists, but only if they "recognize that the dignity of man and the inviolability of human life from conception to natural death ... is the essential moral foundation of the science and art of medicine."

It was the second time the academy has come under fire from its members for its speakers' list this year.

In March, it hastily canceled a stem cell research conference whose speakers included scientists whose work involves human embryonic stem cells, which is opposed by the church. The academy said too few sponsors and participants had signed up to take part.

And in 2010, the academy's membership rebelled against its then-president, Monsignor Renato Fisichella, over his less-than-condemnatory comments about abortion. He was soon replaced.

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