

Mgr Cardoso Sobrinho, archbishop of Recife : exclusive interview in “Présent” (English translation).

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The following interview was published on Thursday in the French catholic daily newspaper, [Présent](#). Excerpts in English appeared on [LifeSite](#) from a translation published on [BigBlueWave](#) whom I would like to thank for having given this publicity to a text which seems to me important. I decided to correct and complete that translation, also in the light of the original interview which I conducted in Spanish with Mgr Cardoso who was so good as to take time to answer my questions. Here then, is the full translation. – Jeanne Smits

– In the wake of the Recife affair, the Osservatore Romano publicly rejected your declarations on the automatic excommunication of those who chose abortion for the little girl and those who carried it out. Since then a tendency has appeared in the media suggesting that Church teaching has changed as to determining whether abortion when the mother’s life is in danger or in other particular circumstances is wrong, whether it is sinful. On the other hand, media lies on important points in the case have been plentiful, even though many people have expressed admiration for your attitude. Could your Excellency tell us what really happened?

– First of all I want to express my very profound gratitude to all those who expressed support. I received hundreds of messages of solidarity from the world over: priests, bishops, lay people, approving my decision to speak out clearly on the law of the Church. I received the “Human Life International” cardinal Von Galen prize, and very recently the Pro Vida association of São Paolo also attributed its prize to me. Thanks be to God, many people approve of what I did.

There are some people, however, in France, in Canada... including bishops, who wrote articles or public letters to state their disapproval. In a spirit of dialogue, I would like to say that is wrong to say that we – that is to say myself and the parish priest of the pregnant little girl – did not give her the special attention she needed. We gave her every attention and every care. What has unfortunately been published is simply not true: we did everything that was in our power to help.

Some, when they speak about the publicity surrounding this affair, affirm that it was not “timely” to speak of excommunication. I do not agree with that point of view. They were practically telling me that we should have forgotten what Canon Law says concerning excommunication. My opinion is different. I say that this law exists for the good of the Church. And that it was not I who excommunicated anyone, as I have repeated countless times. Those who accuse me say that it is I who “excommunicated”, and that’s totally false; I simply drew attention to a law that exists in the Church, canon 1398. And I ask: is it appropriate to remain silent, as many claim? Would it have been better that I not speak at all about excommunication? Well, I answer that I

do not agree. It is a law of the Church for the good of the Church. It has existed for many centuries. The new Code of Canon Law, promulgated in 1983 by the Servant of God Pope John Paul II, reiterates this law. In the same way the Catechism of the Catholic Church, published by the same pope in 1992, repeats and comments on this law. Would it have been better to keep silent? Well, in my opinion, it is of the highest importance to draw everyone's attention, especially that of the Catholic faithful, to the gravity of the crime of abortion. That is the reason why the law exists.

We, in our diocese, have received so many messages from so many people who have told me "Now, I better understand the gravity of abortion, and I will change my conscience." In my opinion, the act of drawing attention to the existence of this excommunication produces a spiritual benefit among the Catholic faithful. But it also benefits others, who apparently perform abortions with their minds at rest and who will from now on, I trust, weigh in their conscience the gravity of what they are doing. That is the final goal of this law of the Church, of this penalty of excommunication: it is medicinal. It is a remedy in view of the conversion of all. For the person who incurs it, it is a means to make him understand that he will have to answer for his act before God. With the Church, we desire that every single person, even those who follow the path of error, may come to live according to the law of God. We do not want the eternal condemnation of anyone. In my opinion, silence – not speaking of excommunication – would cause grave damage to the Church.

But there is something more serious, I have the impression that among those who spoke against me, some are practically insinuating that it would be better to abrogate the canon on excommunication. But the Church does not believe this. The Church maintains this law, because it is necessary for the common good of the Church, when it comes to very grave offences, that there is a clear law, and that this law be applied. These are principles of great importance. For me, silence would be equivalent to complicity. We know – all the international media say so – that there are up to 50 million abortions each year, worldwide. Here in Brazil, the number quoted is about one million each year. In conscience, I feel certain that it is necessary to speak, to waken people's conscience, because silence can be construed as approval.

– I recently interviewed Prof. Josef Seifert who took your defence in the media. He described excommunication as an act of charity toward the persons who incur it, as it makes them realize the damage done to their spiritual life. Would you use that expression?

– It is a spiritual remedy. The Church is invested with a mission, which is to bring all men to eternal salvation, and to make them live in the grace of God. It is a fact that there are people who perform abortions with their minds at rest and who say just as calmly that they will continue. We, as Catholics, and above all as pastors of the Church, cannot remain silent, as if this were all well and good. This is why I repeat that not speaking up, not drawing attention to the gravity, to the seriousness of the problem, and above all to the fact that the Church, for the common good, applies this penalty, would be complicity. It would practically amount to accepting this grave situation.

Here in Brazil, we are in the process of preparing a law to legalize abortion. We Catholics must

speak out first on moral responsibility. Evidently, there are Catholics in our Parliament who defend the law of God, but there are others who defend this bill, beginning with the president of the Republic. We cannot remain silent!

– When you spoke of the automatic excommunication of the mother of the pregnant child and of the doctors who took part in the abortion, did you do so before or after it had been committed?

– I talked about that before and after the abortion, as the note of the archdiocese of Recife to Mgr Fisichella clearly stated: on March 3rd, the day before the abortion, I told journalists about the “medicinal penalty” of canon 1398. Unfortunately the article of mgr Fisichella states that the first time I talked to the press about this affair I talked only about excommunication. That is absolutely false. I expressed myself several times because this affair of a nine year-old pregnant girl attracted widespread media attention. Above all, we did all that depended on us to save three lives: not only the life of the little girl, but the three lives. When the abortion finally did take place, I simply recalled once more the law of the Church. Any person who – in full conscience, of course – commits an abortion is excommunicated. That was the meaning of my declaration.

– Is it true that the little girl was rachitic or that she was suffering from malnutrition?

– No, not at all! The pregnant little girl, even when she was taken to hospital, was living with other children with whom she played like a normal child.

– Did she know that she was pregnant, and that she was expecting two children?

– Yes, of course! Not only did she know it, but she had even said that one of the babies would be for a member of her family, and the other for her so that they could play together. We were to learn later that there were two little girls...

– It has been said that the legitimate father of the little girl, who was opposed to the abortion, was an evangelical Christian. Is this true?

– Yes, that is true, he is not a Catholic. However he was with us totally. I had him at my house for a whole day; he did not accept the abortion.

– There must have been very much emotion...

– Yes. He came from his little town of Alagoinha which is 230 km distant from here. He stayed with us: with me, with Father Edson Rodriguez who is his parish priest, with my lawyer, with the president of the law courts here to see whether it was possible to stop the abortion by legal means. But as you know the abortion was performed after the child was taken without our knowledge to a “health center” which habitually performs abortions.

– Were there any street demonstrations against the abortion outside the clinic where the little girl was originally placed?

– None at all. But in the newspapers and on television there was a lot of pressure in favour of the abortion, and as you know several “feminist” organizations intervened to obtain the abortion.

– ***Was the little girl ever at risk of dying?***

– No, never. The doctors stated this to me most explicitly.

– ***But if she had been in danger of dying, would the abortion have been justified?***

– That possibility was very clearly anticipated by the doctors. They hoped that when six months of pregnancy would be reached, it would be possible to make a C-section. But as the “feminist” groups wanted an abortion, they came to the IMIP (Mother and child institute of Pernambuco) where the child was hospitalized in order to take her to the other “health center” where the abortion was performed within hours of her arrival. They took her in the evening and all was over next day by 10 AM. It is well known here that this “health center” is habitually dedicated to performing abortions. It is very important to me to recall that the doctors who committed the abortion declared that they had been performing abortions for a long time, and with “pride” at that. And they affirm that they will continue. We cannot remain silent in the face of that. And there is so much less reason to say there was “doubt” in this case, as Msr Fisichella unfortunately writes. He said that nobody knows whether the doctor, in the moment of action, didn’t have “doubts” on what he should or should not do. We know the opposite is true: these doctors declared publicly that they practise abortion as part of their lives and have no “doubts” at all on the matter. They want to go on.

Of course there are other Catholic doctors here who say, on the contrary, that they perform no abortions because they believe in God and respect His law.

– ***Would your Excellency have reacted differently if the little girl had really been in danger of dying?***

– No, not at all. We know that even when there is danger of death abortion is never permitted. That is God’s law, as the Church proclaims it. Even in face of this danger, the natural evolution of the situation should have been waited for, trying all the while to save the three lives. This is a fundamental principle of God’s law and also of natural law: the end does not justify the means. My objective can be very excellent : to save the life of the pregnant girl. But the means to reach this end can never be to suppress two innocent lives. That is a natural principle which human reason can understand.

To give an example which is easy to understand here in Brazil: if I want to find food for the poor – and we have so many here – that does not allow me to hold up a bank, to take other people’s money to do a work of charity. And as my team of councillors said – the general vicar, my catholic lawyer and the other signatories of the text I was talking of earlier – it is not up to us to change God’s law, even if public opinion is following another path. Our mission, our so-important mission is to proclaim it for the benefit of all, even in cases like this when it is not easy.

It must be understood: since the very first centuries of the church, there have been laws on excommunication in the Church. They seek to protect the common good of the ecclesial society: it is for this reason that we need a canon law; the juridical aspect of the Church as a human society is indispensable. We cannot simply hope that each person follows his conscience. Evidently, the Church must first of all take care of the spiritual life of each person, but the common good, in the technical sense, is also very important: it consists in an adequate environment in which each may live peaceably. The penalties foreseen by the Code in canon law also have this goal.

– Have you heard what is being said about Mgr Fisichella: that he wrote his note while being “deluded” and “forced” to do so?

– This information reached me indirectly. Certain persons in Brazil, including bishops, called Mgr Fisichella, and they tell me that that was his response: that he followed the indications of hierarchic superiors.

– The fact is that today the international press has come to the point where it is saying that the Church agrees with “therapeutic” abortions. This seems to me a very grave situation: how can one fight against this?

– It is our mission always to proclaim the law of God. You know that in Africa, Pope Benedict spoke out clearly on moral issues and that the press, particularly in France, did not accept it. But that is and remains the mission of the Church: we cannot remain silent for reasons of social acceptability. Within democratic liberty, which is a good thing, trying to legitimize, even within the limits of the law, customs or actions which go against the law of God would be abusive. Our mission, the Church’s mission, is to proclaim the law of God and the Gospel of Jesus-Christ, even if it isn’t easy.

– Are your relations with your fellow-bishops in Brazil good?

– Very good. Two weeks ago we were all at the National assembly of bishops in São Paulo; all the bishops with whom I talked approve my position, not one is against me. On the other hand, I read the texts of several French bishops. It seems to me they were not aware of all the circumstances. They read Mgr Fisichella’s article and believed that to be the truth.

– Perhaps they are now in a position to realize that they reacted to false information. But how does one mend?

– It seems to me important that L’Osservatore Romano should publish my response. This is what we are trying to obtain, as we have been from the start. We sent the archdiocese’s response to Mgr Fisichella’s article to Rome. It’s a natural right to be allowed to respond if someone has been publishing false information, for who knows which motive: the readers of the Osservatore should also be in a position to know the other point of view.

As for myself, my conscience is at peace. I did not expect nor did I wish for these repercussions which have taken on an international dimension. I repeat that the common good of the Church

requires these latae sententiae laws, which serve as permanent warnings and which she will never abrogate. She has always condemned abortion and she always explained why: it does not only hurt the person, it damages society. Today, I repeat that there are 1 million abortions every year in Brazil, 50 million the world over: our silence would be equivalent to consent.

Thank you for letting me set out these points which seem to me important for the spiritual good of souls. Please tell the readers of Présent that I willingly send them my blessing.