



Office of the President

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Most Reverend William S. Skylstad, D.D.
Bishop of Spokane

September 12, 2006

Ms. Irene Khan
Secretary General
International Secretariat
Amnesty International
1 Easton Street
London
WC1X 0DW, United Kingdom

Dear Ms. Khan,

It is with a sense of great alarm that I write to you about the proposal by some within Amnesty International to abandon the organization's traditional neutral stance on abortion, replacing it with an assertive policy of advocating abortion on demand as a "human right." The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops believes a change in policy will erode the human rights of the most vulnerable members of the human family: unborn children. It will also jeopardize Amnesty International's excellent record as a champion of human rights. To abandon this long held position would be a tragic mistake, dividing human rights advocates and diverting Amnesty International from its central and urgent mission of defending human rights as outlined in the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights.

For many years, the Catholic community here in the United States and elsewhere has admired and worked with Amnesty International in its efforts to advance the cause of universal human rights. Greater respect for human rights is one of the hard won achievements of humanity since World War II. Founded by a Catholic layman, Peter Benenson, Amnesty International has been a beacon of hope to thousands of prisoners of conscience, of abuse and torture and a source of inspiration to millions of supporters, including many Catholics who are Amnesty members. Much more urgent work remains, work which we believe will be harmed by this unprecedented and unnecessary involvement in the abortion debate.

We share Amnesty's vision of a "world in which every person enjoys all of the human rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards." Amnesty International and the Catholic Church have both been in the forefront of the struggle to promote the dignity of the human person and basic human rights. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has worked with Amnesty International over many

years on a range of human rights concerns in our own nation, most recently in our common efforts to end the use of the death penalty in the United States. We have also taken up many issues of common concern internationally, ranging from anti-apartheid efforts in South Africa to opposition to the government-sanctioned death squads in Central America to more recent efforts to end the practice of torture by anyone under any circumstances in the struggle against terrorism.

Amnesty International should continue its tradition of focusing on often neglected human rights issues – issues that lack the visibility and advocacy which surround the abortion issue, but are widely acknowledged as legitimate human rights concerns among people of good will. As you know, abortion is not considered a human right in international law. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the recently adopted United Nations Declaration on Human Cloning uphold the principle of the dignity of the unborn child and the need for special protection for the unborn in the context of a concern for advancing human rights. It would be ironic for Amnesty International, as an advocate for human rights, to now deny what various international bodies have acknowledged -- namely that two parties with rights are involved when it comes to birth and abortion.

While the proposed action by Amnesty International may appear to some to support women's freedom or provide a compassionate response to women who are in difficult situations of pregnancy, abortion injures the health and dignity of women at the same time that it ends the life of the unborn child. In the United States, our experience is that women oppose unrestricted abortion as strongly as men or more. These views are sometimes strongest of all among women who have undergone an abortion.

Violence to correct situations, even unjust ones, diminishes human dignity and the fabric of society. When the Second Vatican Council condemned violations of the dignity of the human person such as mutilation, torture and coercion of conscience, it began its list of human rights abuses with actions "opposed to life itself" such as abortion and euthanasia. The right to life itself is fundamental – it is "the right to have rights," and its integrity depends on being acknowledged in absolutely every member of the human family regardless of race, age or condition. This is no peculiarity of Catholic teaching, but an insight of the "natural law" tradition of human rights that has produced so many advances in upholding human dignity. Many of the great figures of our time in advancing human rights and compassion for the destitute – Susan B. Anthony, Mohandas Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Archbishop Oscar Romero, Dorothy Day, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Fannie Lou Hamer – also spoke out against abortion. Many will find it incomprehensible that these giants of human progress must now be seen as enemies of human rights.

A far more compassionate response is to provide support and services for pregnant women and to advance their educational and economic standing in society. The Catholic Church

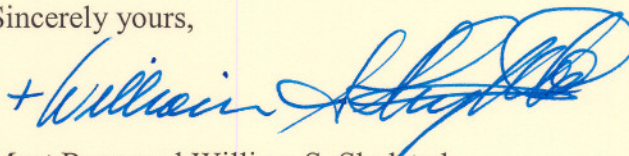
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provides these services to many women around the world and commits itself to continuing to do so. The Catholic Church will also continue to advocate greater attention to these needs in all relevant international assemblies.

If Amnesty International were to advocate for abortion as a human right, it would risk diminishing its own well-deserved moral credibility. It certainly would most likely divide its own members, many of whom are Catholic, and others who defend the rights of unborn children. It could jeopardize Amnesty's support by people in many nations, cultures and religions. The core values, commitments and leadership of Amnesty International for the protection of human rights are still greatly needed. We urge you to maintain the focus of Amnesty International's work on behalf of human rights. Please do not dilute or divert its mission by adopting a position that many see as fundamentally incompatible with a full commitment to human rights and that will deeply divide those working to defend human rights.

Thank you for your attention to our perspective and concerns.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "William S. Skylstad", with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Most Reverend William S. Skylstad
Bishop of Spokane
President

cc:

Rick Halperin, Chair, Board of Directors, AIUSA
Larry Cox, Executive Director, AIUSA
Curt Goering, Senior Deputy Executive Director, Policy and Programs, AIUSA
Julie Hertzog, Senior Deputy Executive Director, Operations, AIUSA