

Vatican Representative: Abortion Is an 'Illegitimate Response' to the Zika Virus



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Pope Francis did not bring up the Zika virus during his six-day visit in Central America, but that didn't stop the Vatican from weighing in.

On Tuesday, a Vatican representative made a statement discouraging abortion, despite the likely connection between the virus and microcephaly, a birth defect that leads babies to be born with abnormally small heads and decreased cognitive abilities, and ignoring calls from several countries' governments that women refrain from getting pregnant for two years.

“Not only is increased access to abortion and abortifacients an illegitimate response to this crisis, but since it terminates the life of a child it is fundamentally not preventative,” said Archbishop Bernardito Auza, the Vatican’s UN representative.

“Regardless of the connection to the Zika virus, it is a fact of human existence that some children develop conditions like microcephaly, and that these children deserve to be protected and cared for throughout their lives, in accordance with our obligation to safeguard all human life, healthy and disabled, with equal commitment, leaving no one behind.”

The *Washington Post* reports:

If women in Catholic-heavy Latin America do get pregnant, abortion is illegal in most countries in the region, though some have exceptions in cases of rape, fetal impairment or danger to the life of the mother. Earlier this month, the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights called on Latin American countries to repeal their policies restricting contraception and abortion rights.

Last week, a representative from the National Council of Bishops in Brazil doubled down on the Church’s opposition to birth control as well:

“Contraceptives are not a solution. There is not a single change in the Church’s position,” Bishop Leonardo Ulrich Steiner said, according to the *New York Times*.

Instead, the representative told couples to abstain from sex or to use “natural family planning,” which involves women only engaging in sex during the time in their menstrual cycle in which they are least

fertile. This method, evidently, puts all of the burden on women to know when to have intercourse, and conveniently ignores the other party involved.

Meanwhile, newly pregnant women in Zika-affected countries have taken to pleading on the internet—in particular to an organization called Women on Web—for emergency contraceptives and abortion pills.

“I haven’t seen anything from the governments of these countries themselves that indicate they are reconsidering the restrictive laws because of this crisis. I haven’t seen any of that,” Women on Web founder Dr. Rebecca Gomperts told the *Washington Post*.

“The only calls that have gone out from health ministers is ‘Don’t get pregnant,’ which is kind of an unrealistic demand I think, if contraception is not available for the poorest.”

Update: According to the *Chicago Tribune*, Pope Francis weighed in, absolutely condemning abortion even in Zika-affected countries, but showing some tolerance for the use of birth control.

“Abortion isn’t a ‘lesser evil,’ it’s a crime,” he said, referencing a question from a reporter. “Taking one life to save another, that’s what the Mafia does. It’s a crime. It’s an absolute evil... On the other hand, avoiding pregnancy is not an absolute evil. In certain cases, as in this one, such as the one I mentioned of Blessed Paul VI, it was clear.”

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