



# The Holy See

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## ***LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE GERMAN BISHOPS***

*To my Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate  
Greetings and the Apostolic Blessing*

1. In a Letter of 11 January 1998 I offered you, in my responsibility as Supreme Pastor of the Church, some guidelines for dealing in the future with the difficult question of the correct relationship of Catholic counseling centres to the State-regulated counseling system in accordance with the Pregnancy and Family Assistance Act of 21 August 1995. I invited you not only to continue unchanged the counseling and assistance you offer to pregnant women in need but also, if possible, to strengthen it further. At the same time, for the clarity of our witness to the inviolability of every human life I invited you to ensure that ecclesiastical counseling centres or those connected with the Church would no longer issue the certificate that, according to the law, is the necessary requirement for obtaining a non-punishable abortion. On 6 February 1998 Bishop Karl Lehmann, President of your Bishops' Conference, informed me in your name that you all firmly intended to comply with my urgent request. Today, as then, I would like once again to thank you for this decision, which expresses your deep unity with the Successor of Peter and your unconditional commitment to the defence of unborn life.

In order to bring both aspects of my request correctly into line, you set up a working group, whose results were presented on 22 and 23 February 1999 at the Bishops' plenary session. With a letter of 12 March 1999 Bishop Lehmann communicated the results of the working group and informed me of the conclusions reached by the plenary session. I gladly express my gratitude for your great commitment, in collaboration with many experts, to finding solutions. I thank you for clearly and repeatedly stressing the importance of unity among yourselves and with the Holy See, in order to find a credible solution and to overcome the polarization that has occurred among the faithful. In recent weeks I have carefully considered, in study and prayer before the Lord, the viewpoints contained in your response and I would now like to give you my decision.

2. The proposed solution preferred by the majority of your Bishops' Conference combines an extensive "Counseling and Assistance Plan" with a new wording of the counseling certificate, for which the working group provides a choice of three versions. The plan offers a series of elements which are clearly aimed at the welfare of pregnant women and the defence

of unborn children. The integration of counseling with the offer of assistance, and especially the binding commitments regarding support, aid and job placement, make the purpose of the Church's counseling activity - the support of women in crisis situations and the defence of unborn children's right to life - even more clearly understandable in your society than before. The various opportunities for counseling and assistance must help an even greater number of women in need to turn to Church counselors or those connected with the Church and to maintain the Church's effective presence in the counseling of pregnant women.

3. The involvement of the "Counseling and Assistance Plan" in the crisis counseling required by law, however, raises serious questions. The certificate issued to women at the end of counseling has certainly acquired an additional purpose; it documents the life-oriented nature of Church counseling and serves as a guarantee for granting the assistance promised. The decisive question for evaluating the proposal is whether the text put at the end still allows the certificate to be used for obtaining an abortion. If that were the case, then it would be in conflict with my abovementioned Letter and with the Joint Statement issued on 26 January 1998 by the Permanent Council of your Bishops' Conference saying that you would comply with my request and in the future no longer issue a "certificate of that sort".

The fact that the text, especially in versions 2 and 3, remains at least unclear in this respect is certainly one of reasons why it has not received the unanimous approval of the Bishops. Version 1 of the proposal comes the closest of all to your desire and mine for a "different certificate". So that the juridical and moral quality of this document may be unambiguous, I ask you to make clear in the text itself that the certificate, which verifies the fact of Church counseling and gives a right to the promised assistance, cannot be used to obtain a non-punishable abortion according to § 281a (1) of the Criminal Code. In consequence, therefore, the written certificate that is issued to women in the context of the "Counseling and Assistance Plan" should, in accordance with version 1, mention only the purpose of the counseling and assistance, with the following phrase added at the end: "This certificate cannot be used to obtain a non-punishable abortion".

With this necessary addition, Catholic counselors and the Church, on whose behalf the counselors act, are freed from a situation which conflicts with their basic belief regarding the defence of life and with the purpose of their crisis counseling. The unconditional commitment to every unborn life, to which the Church feels bound from the very beginning, permits no ambiguity or compromise. Here, in word and deed, the Church must speak one and the same language always and everywhere. I hope that this solution will also help to restore unity on this important issue to your Bishops' Conference and to resolve the tensions that have arisen among the Catholic public.

4. Dear Brothers! I know that for years all of you have been defending the right to life of unborn children and, in the spirit of the Gospel, you spare no effort in word and deed to support women in difficult situations. I thank you for this profession of the Gospel of life. I would like once again to stress that I know and appreciate your good will, and I trust that you will courageously continue to explain to the public the values underlying the Church's position. At the same time I ask you, for

the dignity of life and for the clarity of the Church's witness, to accept unanimously my decision on the issue and to carry it out this year. Moreover, you will find a way to offer the "Counseling and Assistance Plan" not only to those women whose situation makes it difficult or impossible for them to imagine life with a child, but also to other pregnant women who are in trouble and need help.

On this occasion I would like to thank the many people in your beloved country who in one way or another help to promote the right to life grounded in your Constitution. An especially valuable service is given by counselors who assist pregnant women in need and commit themselves to the life of unborn children. I express my sincere gratitude to them and to all who are publicly or privately at the service of life. I am confident that the Catholic faithful - together with many other Christians and people of good will -, in union with the Bishops and with me as the Supreme Pastor of the Church, will continue their courageous struggle for the life of all human beings, whether born or unborn, whether old or young, whether sick or healthy, and that they will make every effort "so that our time, marked by all too many signs of death, may at last witness the establishment of a new culture of life, the fruit of the culture of truth and love" (*Evangelium vitae*, n. 77).

I commend you and all the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care to Mary, Mother of the Lord, and cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing.

*From the Vatican, 3 June 1999, Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ.*

**JOHN PAUL II**