



A message to the faithful of the archdiocese from Archbishop  
Michael Jackels

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**Zika, contraception and church teaching**

Contrary to recent media stories, Pope Francis is not changing the Church's teaching against the use of artificial means of contraception. This claim is based on the Pope's answer to a question put to him during a press conference on the plane ride back to Rome after his trip to Mexico:

*Journalist: Holy Father, for several weeks there's been a lot of concern in many Latin American countries but also in Europe regarding the Zika virus. The greatest risk would be for pregnant women. There is anguish. Some authorities have proposed abortion, or else to avoiding pregnancy. As regards avoiding pregnancy, on this issue, can the Church take into consideration the concept of "the lesser of two evils?"*

*Pope Francis: Abortion is not the lesser of two evils. It is a crime. It is to throw someone out in order to save another. That's what the Mafia does. It is a crime, an absolute evil. On the 'lesser evil,' avoiding pregnancy, we are speaking in terms of the conflict between the fifth and sixth commandment. Paul VI, a great man, in a difficult situation in Africa, permitted nuns to use contraceptives in cases of rape.*

*Don't confuse the evil of avoiding pregnancy by itself, with abortion. Abortion is not a theological problem, it is a human problem, it is a medical problem. You kill one person to save another, in the best case scenario. Or to live comfortably, no? It's against the Hippocratic oaths doctors must take. It is an evil in and of itself, but it is not a religious evil in the beginning, no, it's a human evil. Then obviously, as with every human evil, each killing is condemned. On the other hand, avoiding pregnancy is not an absolute evil. In certain cases, as in this one, or in the one I mentioned of Blessed Paul VI, it was clear. I would also urge doctors to do their utmost to find vaccines against these two mosquitoes that carry this disease.*

The journalist did not submit the question in advance, and so the Pope's answer was not scripted. And unfortunately we can't ask the Pope what he meant by this or that.

The central issue is whether abortion or avoiding pregnancy (which should not be understood as synonymous with or necessarily including contraception) is a lesser evil than the possible risks to pregnant women from the Zika virus.

The Pope answered that abortion pertains to the Fifth Commandment, which forbids the murder of an innocent person. As such, abortion is not a lesser evil; rather, it is an absolute evil that can never be morally justified.

Avoiding pregnancy, on the other hand, pertains to the Sixth Commandment, which forbids sexual activity for people who are not husband and wife, and between husband and wife, sexual activity that excludes either love or openness to new life.

Regarding the lesser evil question, it is not an evil when, for example, a husband and wife decide for serious reasons to avoid pregnancy, and so they either abstain from sexual activity or use natural family planning. Contraception is not a moral option.

Also, it is not an evil for women to take measures to avoid pregnancy, excluding abortion, when live in grave danger of being raped, or when they have been raped (see *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, paragraph 36). There is no parallel or precedent here with the possible threat of the Zika virus.

Likewise in the case of sex outside of marriage, which is an evil in itself, a sin against the Sixth Commandment.

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