



## **ASIA/PHILIPPINES - The Supreme Court: Reproductive Health law is valid, but yes to conscientious objection**

Manila ( Agenzia Fides) - The controversial 'Reproductive Health Law' has just been backed by the Philippine's Supreme Court, saying it's constitutional except for key provisions on family planning. The selected provisions can be found in Section 7, 17 and some parts of Section 23 of the Reproductive Health measure. As Fides learned, in a judgment delivered this morning, April 8, after 16 years of legal battles, the Court accepted the overall system of the law but recognized the right to conscientious objection with regards to individual doctors or private health care facilities.

The law introduces methods of also artificial family planning, such as contraception, public health care assistance to stop overpopulation. It was strongly opposed by the Catholic Church and instead promoted and supported by the government of President Benigno Aquino. The Supreme Court has examined as many as 14 complaints with the exceptions of unconstitutionality.

Among the articles that will have to be modified: art. 7 (Access to family planning), which also imposed private religious organizations "to provide modern family planning methods, both natural and artificial". The Court has recognized the right to conscientious objection by declaring penalties and sanctions unconstitutional for doctors who refused to provide information or services on artificial methods of family planning (Art. 17 and 23).

Last night, thousands of faithful Catholics, led by Fr. Melvin Castro, Secretary of the Commission for life and family in the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, gave birth to a prayer vigil and then went in procession in front of the Supreme Court building, waiting for the verdict. Fr. Castro said: "We will respect the court's decision, but will not violate the teachings of the Gospel".

In a note sent to Fides, the Catholic layman Rene Bullecer, head of the NGO "Human Life International" in the Philippines says: "We will continue in our commitment to the defense of life and family in the Philippines". The NGO challenged some procedures imposed by the law: for example, notes Bullecer, the government will not be able to give an engaged couple marriage documents without a "Certificate of Conformity" issued by the Office of Family Planning that states they "have received adequate instructions on family planning". The text imposed doctors to provide a full range of "reproductive health" services, such as contraception, sterilization and abortion services, without providing for conscientious objection.

Catholics, sustained by the Bishops of the Philippines, are appealing to the Philippine Constitution which states: "The State recognizes the sanctity of family life and has to protect and strengthen the family as the basic autonomous social institution of society. It is committed to protecting the mother's life and the life of the unborn from the moment of conception". (PA) (Agenzia Fides 08/04/2014)