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Authors	Pontifical Academy for Life
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PONTIFICAL ACADEMY FOR LIFE

STATEMENT ON THE SO-CALLED "MORNING-AFTER PILL"

As is commonly known, the so-called *morning-after pill* recently went on sale in Italian pharmacies. It is a well-known chemical product (of the hormonal type) which has frequently - even in the past week - been presented by many in the field and by the mass media as a mere contraceptive or, more precisely, as an "emergency contraceptive", which can be used within a short time after a presumably fertile act of sexual intercourse, should one wish to prevent the continuation of an unwanted pregnancy. The inevitable critical reactions of those who have raised serious doubts about how this product works, namely, that its action is not merely "contraceptive" but "abortifacient", have received the very hasty reply that such concerns appear unfounded, since the morning-after pill has an "anti-implantation" effect, thus implicitly suggesting a clear distinction between abortion and *interception* (preventing the implantation of the fertilized ovum, i.e., the embryo, in the uterine wall).

Considering that the use of this product concerns fundamental human goods and values, to the point of involving the origins of human life itself, the Pontifical Academy for Life feels the pressing duty and definite need to offer some clarifications and considerations on the subject, reaffirming moreover already well-known ethical positions supported by precise scientific data and reinforced by Catholic doctrine.

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1. The *morning-after pill* is a hormone-based preparation (it can contain oestrogens, oestrogen/progestogens or only progestogens) which, within and no later than 72 hours after a presumably fertile act of sexual intercourse, has a predominantly "anti-implantation" function, i.e., it prevents a possible fertilized ovum (which is a human embryo), by now in the *blastocyst* stage of its development (fifth to sixth day after fertilization), from being implanted in the uterine wall by a process of altering the wall itself.

The final result will thus be the expulsion and loss of this embryo.

Only if this pill were to be taken several days before the moment of ovulation could it sometimes act to prevent the latter (in this case it would function as a typical "contraceptive").

However, the woman who uses this kind of pill does so in the fear that she may be in her fertile period and therefore intends to cause the expulsion of a possible new conceptus; above all, it would be unrealistic to think that a woman, finding herself in the situation of wanting to use an emergency contraceptive, would be able to know exactly and opportunely her current state of fertility.

2. The decision to use the term "fertilized ovum" to indicate the earliest phases of embryonic development can in no way lead to an artificial value distinction between different moments in the development of the same human individual. In other words, if it can be useful, for reasons of scientific description, to distinguish with conventional terms (fertilized ovum, embryo, fetus, etc.) different moments in a single growth process, it can never be legitimate to decide arbitrarily that the human individual has greater or lesser value (with the resulting variation in the duty to protect it) according to its stage of development.

3. It is clear, therefore, that the proven "anti-implantation" action of the *morning-after pill* is really nothing other than a chemically induced abortion. It is neither intellectually consistent nor scientifically justifiable to say that we are not dealing with the same thing.

Moreover, it seems sufficiently clear that those who ask for or offer this pill are seeking the direct termination of a possible pregnancy already in progress, just as in the case of abortion. Pregnancy, in fact, begins with fertilization and not with the implantation of the blastocyst in the uterine wall, which is what is being implicitly suggested.

4. Consequently, from the ethical standpoint the same absolute unlawfulness of abortifacient procedures also applies to distributing, prescribing and taking the *morning-after pill.* All who, whether sharing the intention or not, directly co-operate with this procedure are also morally responsible for it.

5. A further consideration should be made regarding the use of the *morning-after pill* in relation to the application of Law 194/78, which in Italy regulates the conditions and procedures for the voluntary termination of pregnancy.

Saying that the pill is an "anti-implantation" product, instead of using the more transparent term "abortifacient", makes it possible *to avoid* all the obligatory procedures required by Law 194 in order to terminate a pregnancy (prior interview, verification of pregnancy, determination of growth stage, time for reflection, etc.), by practising a form of abortion that is completely hidden and cannot be recorded by any institution. All this seems, then, to be in direct contradiction to the correct application of Law 194, itself debatable.

6. In the end, since these procedures are becoming more widespread, we strongly urge everyone who works in this sector to make a firm objection of *moral* conscience, which will bear courageous and practical witness to the inalienable value of human life, especially in view of the new *hidden* forms of aggression against the weakest and most defenceless individuals, as is the case with a human embryo.

Vatican City, 31 October 2000.