

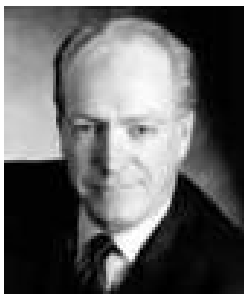
In reform debate, 'pro-lifers undermine their cause'

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 11, 2009



Analysis

"The path to hell is paved with good intentions," goes the proverbial wisdom. No one doubts the good intentions of the pro-life movement in the current debate about health care. They wish to make sure that universal health care reform is at least neutral in its policy ramifications for abortion. But, some of the pro-life movement's most prominent spokespeople are unwittingly playing into the hands of groups like NARAL and Planned Parenthood that seek to skirt around the Hyde Amendment's ban on federal funding for abortion.



Deal Hudson, editor of *Inside Catholic*, recently questioned the repeated assertion of the

bishops that health care is a right not a privilege. "Perhaps more Catholics would question the necessity of the present suggestion for health care reform if they realized the central argument -- health care as a human right -- is muddled and, therefore, dangerous." He argued that government should not play a greater role in health care, even though the market has failed to insure millions of Americans. Hudson mentions his concern about abortion funding, but it is clear that he is opposed to any reasonable health care reform effort per se, not just because it may fund abortions.

Other Catholic critics of health care reform focus on the virtues of the market and betray hostility to government that is unknown in Catholic social teaching. Fr. Robert Sirico of the Acton Institute recently complained that "the tone-deaf religious left has mobilized for the rescue of socialized medicine, one of its most dearly sought objectives." Sirico is a champion of the free market and has evidently not noticed that the market has left some 47 million of his fellow citizens without access to health care.



EWTN, where Sirico is often a featured expert, has betrayed a similar hostility to health care

reform. On the show "The World Over" host Raymond Arroyo recently questioned Sr. Carol Keehan, wondering if government-run health care would undercut the charitable mission of the church. Keehan responded politely, not calling attention to the ignorance of the question: Medicare and Medicaid, the government-run health care programs for the elderly and the poor, have not "undercut" the church's mission to those twin vulnerable sections of the populace.

Most distressingly, some bishops seem to be at odds with their own conference on the need for health care reform. An article in *The New York Times* called attention to a recent pastoral letter by Bishop R. Walter Nickless of the Sioux City, Iowa, diocese. Nickless claimed, "The Catholic church does not teach that government should directly provide health care. ... Any legislation that undermines the vitality of the private sector is suspect." Nickless also insisted that health care is not a natural right, which seems to directly contradict both the statements of the bishops' conference over several decades and any number of papal utterances. Meanwhile, in a pastoral statement released Sept. 1, Kansas City, Kan., Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann and Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., Bishop Robert W. Finn give short shrift to the idea that health care is a right and warn against "government socialization of medical services."

The irony, of course, is that all of these conservative opponents of health care reform share a determination with many liberal Catholics to prevent the reform legislation from becoming a vehicle to advance the availability of abortion or to provide public funding for the procedure. But, by demonstrating their determined opposition to any and all of the health care reform efforts pending before Congress, they undermine the pro-life part of their program. In fact, they play right into the hands of NARAL and NOW and those groups who do want to hijack health care reform to skirt around the Hyde Amendment's prohibition of federal funds subsidizing abortion services. The administration and the leaders in Congress have no reason to listen to pro-life advocates on abortion if they are going to be opposed to the final bill on other grounds anyway.

The conservative position contrasts unfavorably with that of the bishops' conference. The bishops have been lobbying for universal health insurance for decades but they have insisted that any legislative tinkering with the Hyde Amendment is a deal-breaker. When they sit down with the administration and congressional leadership, they can say, "Look, we want to support you, but we need to make sure this bill does not advance abortion funding." The administration, looking for support where it can find it, has an incentive to strike any pro-abortion language from the bill.

Kristen Day, the executive director of Democrats for Life, is worried about the current state of health care legislation, which includes subsidies for health care plans that could include abortion coverage. "If we are serious about passing a health care reform bill, we have to keep abortion out of it," she told NCR. "We work with the bishops and they agree that everyone should have health care. We especially want health care for pregnant women."



Of course, inside-the-Beltway strategies are important but they are not the whole picture.

"The American bishops have demonstrated what being pro-life really entails: fulsome and open-handed support for the complex needs of life in all its stages," says Professor Stephen Schneck, director of the Life Cycle Institute at The Catholic University of America in Washington. "Would that the rest of the pro-life movement had the moral compass of the Catholic bishops. More than 45 million Americans are without health care and nearly 30 million of those are children. The moral imperative of being pro-life brooks no excuses for avoiding the desperate needs of these least of our brethren. And, yes, it's high time to call to accounts those so-called pro-life leaders who dodge, who equivocate, who lack courage, or -- most tragically -- who oppose all policy efforts to address the life needs of these many Americans."

In short, as Catholics we are called to witness to the fullness of the church's social teaching, not merely to become shells for the Republican Party.

It is strange indeed to see conservative Catholics unwittingly aiding and abetting the agenda of the pro-abortion organizations they oppose. And stranger still that conservatives who spent the last election cycle saying that no political issue mattered as much as abortion are suddenly putting their idolatry of the market before adopting a sound strategy for keeping abortion coverage out of the health care reform effort. They have provided ample reason for the administration and Congress to ignore their pleas on abortion. They may see themselves as the "loyal opposition" but they are not being loyal to the pro-life cause they espouse. They are undermining it.

[Michael Sean Winters is a regular NCR contributor.]

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