

## What the church teaches on health care reform

Richard McBrien | Oct. 5, 2009 Essays in Theology

Anyone with a newspaper subscription or an Internet connection does not lack for opinions about the legislation on health-care reform working through Congress.

The point and purpose of this week's column, however, is not to advocate in favor of one or another proposed bill, but to make sure that Catholics and other interested readers know what the official teaching of the Catholic church is -- not on any of the specific proposals, but on the key moral elements of any reform of the health-care system in the United States.

Bishop William Murphy, head of the Diocese of Rockville Centre, New York, and chair of the U. S. Bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, gave the essence of the church's position in a letter to members of Congress, dated July 17, an excerpt of which was cited in an editorial in the *National Catholic Reporter*, "The right to health care" (9/18/09):

"Reform efforts must begin with the principle that decent health care is not a privilege, but a right and a requirement to protect the life and dignity of every person. ... *The bishops' conference believes health care reform should be truly universal and it should be genuinely affordable*" (italics in original).

The teaching that health care is a right rather than a privilege was articulated by Pope John XXIII in his encyclical, *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth), published less than two months before his death on June 3, 1963.

The pope began that encyclical with a list of rights, the first set of which pertained to the right to life and a worthy standard of living. Included in these rights were the right to "food, clothing, shelter, *medical care*, rest and finally the necessary social services" (n. 11; my italics).

Pope John Paul II included health insurance in a list of "the rights of workers," alongside social security, pensions, and compensation in the case of accidents, in his own encyclical, *Centesimus Annus* (The Hundredth Year), n. 15, on the centenary of Pope Leo XIII's landmark encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things), which had been published in 1891.

Among the major thrusts of John Paul II's encyclical were its concern for the poor and its explicit endorsement of the so-called "preferential option for the poor" (n. 11). Thus, when we are reminded that there are almost 50 million Americans without health insurance, and that some 30 million of these are children, we can begin to appreciate the moral urgency of health-care reform.

But there are many Americans -- Catholics included -- who are satisfied with their own private insurance plans (in spite of continually rising premiums) or with their government-run Medicare or Medicaid. They oppose health-care reform because they worry that it will somehow put at risk what they currently have.

Therefore, when it comes to providing universal health insurance, they balk. They ask, why should our tax dollars go to support people (many of whom are African-American and Hispanic-American) who, in their

minds, are responsible for their own health care?

There may be operating here a kind of Social Darwinism ("God helps those who help themselves") that is directly at odds with Catholic social teaching and the demands of the Gospel itself. It is a mentality encapsulated in the crack, "I'm up, pull up the ladder."

A Catholic has only to note the many references to health care in the U. S. Bishops' pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All" (1986): nn. 86, 90, 103, 191, 212, 230, 247, and 286.

In the same bishops' annual Labor Day statement released early last month, Bishop Murphy wrote on their behalf: "The Catholic bishops continue to work for health care that is accessible, affordable and respects the life and dignity of every human being from the moment of conception to the moment of natural death."

Indeed, he continued, "Health care is an essential good for every human person. In a society like ours, no one should lack access to decent health care."

Accordingly, he urged every Catholic "to join the bishops in advocating for health care reform that is truly universal and protects human life at every stage of development" (*Origins*, 9/17/09).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church had also supported health care for those without access to it: "Concern for the health of its citizens requires that society help in the attainment of living-conditions that allow them to grow and reach maturity: food and clothing, housing, *health care*, basic education, employment, and social assistance" (n. 2288, my italics).

Official Catholic teaching on this issue is not in question. Catholic attitudes are.

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