

In praise of the Catholic role

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When history looks back on the momentous passage of the health care reform bill, the Catholic debate over the bill's abortion provisions and the church's long-term conviction that health care rises to the stature of a universal right will certainly play large in any analysis.

It is unfortunate that those two elements emerged in the cauldron of overheated partisan politics as competing claims. In the end, the perfect was not permitted to sabotage the good, and we have the underpinning of Catholic social teaching, as well as the competence and courage of several distinctive Catholic groups to thank for that.

It is unlikely that the Congress as a whole would have been so intent on finding a way to assure that federal money is not spent to procure abortion if the U.S. Catholic bishops and the staff that leads their antiabortion efforts had not made the case with such persistence.

It is just as unlikely that the overall bill would have passed had not representatives of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the Catholic social justice lobby Network and, perhaps most important, the Catholic Health Association provided a lucid, Catholic rationale for those who wished to vote for the bill. They added heft to the arguments and efforts already made by the groups Catholics United, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, and Catholic Democrats. No doubt, they also provided cover for some legislators who were vulnerable to the most vitriolic attacks from the more extreme antiabortion groups.

Politics is not religion, it is not faith, it is not creed, though those of faith and creed and religious practice should certainly seek to influence political decisions. In the end, however, politics, especially in a country as pluralistic in its makeup as the United States, is the art of compromise. The hope is that the compromises keep us heading toward the greater good.

We think the health care reforms now enacted into law are strong steps toward a greater good and contain, even before President Obama's executive order, language that adheres to existing law regarding abortion.

Our gratitude is for Catholic groups and leaders who, in this instance, stepped in to provide the prudence and reasonableness that the political process requires. "We are confident that the reform law does not allow federal funding of abortion and that it keeps in place important conscience protections for caregivers and institutions alike," said Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, in support of the legislation.

She noted that the bill also contains \$250 million to fund counseling, education, job training and housing for vulnerable women who are pregnant or parenting.

If the past is any indication, that kind of concrete help, as well as access to affordable health care for the most vulnerable, are the kinds of measures that will reduce the number of abortions far faster than the ongoing debate over the issue.

Moreover, the largest expansion of the nation's safety social net in 45 years -- including health coverage for more than 30 million Americans -- is a monumental achievement worthy of praise.

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