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Nuns banned from promoting vocations

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

Two stories currently on the web site illustrate the sorry state of episcopal leadership of the Catholic Church in the United States. The first, by Jerry Filteau, is a fact check of the bishops' claim about the recently passed health care reform bill. What becomes clear in his sober analysis is that the bishops' objections, based on the claims that the reform bill would somehow increase access to abortion, were groundless. The bishops would have sacrificed a once-in-half-a-century opportunity to move closer to universal health care for what turns out to be a phantom of the imagination of the most extreme elements in the anti-abortion lobby.

The second is Judy Gross's account of Greensburg, Pa., Bishop Lawrence E. Brandt's position prohibiting a women's religious order from advertising its upcoming vocation recruitment events in the diocesan newspaper because the order signed on to support the health care reform bill. We have published other accounts of episcopal tantrums provoked by women religious who supported the reform, but Brandt's action is especially remarkable.

Msgr. Lawrence T. Persico, vicar general of the Greensburg diocese, wrote a letter to priests in the diocese, stating that no diocesan office, *The Catholic Accent* (the diocesan newspaper), nor any parish would promote a vocation awareness program of any religious community that has taken a stance against the United States bishops by being a signatory of the Network document.

What is interesting, of course, is that a position on a political question would be raised to the level of doctrine. Are the bishops now claiming some manner of authoritative, infallible teaching when it comes to political judgments?

It is especially ironic that bishops should move so quickly against a political decision ? essentially finding

an idea so dangerous that it requires some form of discipline ? when we continue to read documents that have been released detailing the hierarchy's tolerance for and patience with ordained men who were serial molesters of children.

We are fortunate that religious women had the courage to rise above ideologically driven talking points and to articulate an intelligent and pragmatic position based on the deep tradition of Catholic social teaching as well as their experience as front-line providers of care for the sick and the marginalized. An issue as significant as health care deserved such prudence and thoughtfulness.

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