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R.I. hospital latest victim in health care flap

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Bishop Thomas Tobin (CNS)

A Rhode Island health care system has become the latest casuality following a bitter split between U.S. Catholic bishops and Catholic organizations over abortion clauses in health care legislation last month.

Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, R.I., has demanded that the Catholic Health Association remove St. Joseph Health Services of Rhode Island from its membership rolls, calling its affiliation with the association ?embarrassing? according to Religion News Service, which first reported the story.

In a March 29 letter to CHA President and Chief Executive Officer Sister Carol Keehan, Tobin said the association had "misled the public and caused serious scandal for many members of the church."

St. Joseph Health Services is sponsored by the diocese and is its only Catholic hospital, said a diocesan spokesman.

Catholic Hospital Association spokesman Fred Caesar told Religion News Service Tobin's request was granted and that one other hospital said it may not renew its membership in the association, but no others have left. Caesar declined to name the hospital, or where it is located.

Last month, with the outcome of the Democratic Party-supported health care bill uncertain, Daughter of Charity Keehan urged the House to pass the Senate-approved bill, declaring that despite other weaknesses that still needed fixing, the Senate bill did not introduce or expand federal funding for elective abortion.

The U.S. Catholic bishops disagreed, and urged the bill's defeat. The bill passed on March 21, after President Obama promised to sign an executive order upholding a longstanding ban on federal funding of abortions except in cases of rape, incest, and the poor health of the mother.

Tobin said the association?s support for the bill, "in contradiction to the position of the bishops ... provided an excuse for members of Congress" to vote for it. The bishop has been an outspoken critic of Catholics--particularly politicians--who do not support making abortion illegal.

Tobin some gained notoriety during the 2009 elections when it became public that in 2007 he told Rhode Island Congressman Joseph Patrick Kennedy that he should refrain from presenting himself for communion because of his pro-choice position on abortion.

The Providence Rhode Island bishop?s action is the latest episcopal fallout to become public following the split between the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and some politically active Catholic groups that supported passage of the health care legislation.

Citing support by the Sisters of St. Joseph in Baden, Pa. for the health care legislation, Bishop Lawrence E. Brandt of Greensburg, Pa., prohibited it from advertising upcoming vocation recruitment events. The result is that the sisters will not be allowed to promote recruitment with the support of diocesan media.

Just hours before the House was to vote on the Senate bill, Sister of Social Service Simone Campbell, executive director of Network, the political arm of the majority of U.S. Catholic women religious congregations, issued a statement lauding the Catholic Health Association?s stand in support of the bill. She also drafted a letter to members of Congress that she distributed to many leaders of women?s religious orders, urging passage of the Senate bill.

Many women religious order heads, including the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, signed on. Among those to sign on was the leadership team of the St. Joseph Sisters of Baden. The congregation operates out of the Diocese of Pittsburgh, where the motherhouse is situated. Greensburg is a neighboring diocese, where the sisters have a long history of service.

Following a request by the sisters for diocesan media support, Msgr. Lawrence T. Persico, vicar general of the Greensburg diocese, wrote a letter, dated April 8, to priests in the diocese, stating that no diocesan office or the diocesan newspaper or 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.?

Using strong words during an address in Mundelein Seminary, Archbishop Raymond Burke, former archbishop of Saint Louis and now head of the Vatican?s Apostolic Signatura reportedly said April 9 that consecrated religious who openly dissent from the authority of Rome and the church's teaching on life are "an absurdity of the most tragic kind" and should cease identifying themselves as Catholic.

Burke?s remarks were first reported by Thomas Peters of the American Papist blog and later on LifeSiteNews.com. Burke gave his remarks in a keynote address at the Institute for Religious Life?s national meeting at the seminary in Illinois.

According to excerpts of the address published by Peters, Burke took a moment to express his exasperation with the defiance of Catholic religious women who supported the health care bill.

"Who could imagine that consecrated religious would openly, and in defiance of the bishops as successors of the apostles, publicly endorse legislation containing provisions which violated the natural moral law in its most fundamental tenets ? the safeguarding and promoting of innocence and defenseless life, and fail to safeguard the demands of the free exercise of conscience for health care workers?" Burke questioned.

"Was not the Speaker of the House [Nancy Pelosi] glowing to report that so many religious sisters were in support of her proposed health care plan?" he asked. "Was not a religious sister [Sr. Carol Keehan, President of CHA] one of the recipients of a pen used by the President of the United States to sign the health care plan into law?

"Now is the time for us all, and in particular for consecrated persons to stand up for the truth and to call upon our fellow Catholics in leadership to do the same, or to cease identifying themselves as Catholics."

His remarks reportedly spilled over to include actions taken by many U.S. women religious communities that did not respond fully to requests for information on questionnaires dealing with their congregations as part of the Vatican ordered Apostolic Visitation.

Burke reportedly indicated that the attitude of sisters towards the visitation represents "a growing tendency among certain consecrated religious to view themselves outside and above the body of Christ as a parallel institution looking in upon the Church with an autonomy which contradicts their very nature."
"Who ever could have imagined that religious congregations of pontifical right, would openly organize to resist and attempt to frustrate an apostolic visitation, that is, a visit to their congregations carried out under the authority of the vicar of Christ on earth, to whom all religious are bound by the strongest bonds of loyalty and obedience?" he asked.

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