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Bishops defend opposition to health care reform

by Kevin Eckstrom by Religion News Service

WASHINGTON -- Saying their opposition to health care reform was "misinterpreted, misunderstood and misused," U.S. Catholic bishops want Congress to address the law's "defects" but signaled they do not favor total repeal.

In a lengthy statement hoping to "set the record straight," leading members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops May 21 defended their opposition to the law that Catholic nuns and hospitals supported.

"We will never conclude that we must accept what is intrinsically evil so that some other good may be achieved," said the statement released by the chairmen of the bishops' pro-life, domestic policy and immigration committees.

The bishops initially supported a health care reform package as long as it maintained existing curbs on abortion, included conscience protection language for medical personnel and did not restrict health care access for immigrants. The bishops were largely satisfied with the version passed by the House.

But the bishops pronounced the Senate's version -- which ultimately became law -- as "profoundly flawed" because of its abortion provisions. The Catholic Health Association supported it, as did an umbrella group of Catholic nuns.

In their statement, the bishops said the division among Catholics resulted in "confusion and a wound to Catholic unity," and argued that supporters of the bill had overstepped their authority.

"Making such moral judgments, and providing guidance to Catholics on whether an action by government is moral or immoral, is first of all the task of the bishops, not of any other group or individual," they said.

With the health reform law now a reality, the bishops said the provisions that prompted their opposition

must now be addressed. "The defects can be judged soberly in their own right, and solutions can be advanced in Congress while retaining what is good in the new law."

But the bishops signaled that they do not support efforts by some conservatives to scrap the law wholesale. Without fixing the provisions on abortion, conscience protection and access for immigrants, the bishops said the status quo would be "ammunition" for those seeking its repeal.

"We do not need agreement ... that the problems are serious enough to oppose the legislation -- we only need agreement that the problems are real and deserve to be addressed," they said.

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