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Health Care: Transcript of Cardinal George June 16 NCR interview

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

In the latest twist to the saga of intra-Catholic tensions over health care reform, the U.S. bishops' top communications officer has accused a Catholic media outlet of "fabricating" critical quotes from Cardinal Francis George, president of the conference, about the Catholic Health Association during a recent closed-door gathering of the bishops in St. Petersburg, Florida.

That outlet, the Catholic News Agency, is standing by its report.

Based in Denver, the Catholic News Agency is an offshoot of the Latin American Catholic news service ACI-Prensa, and partners with EWTN in an internet news service. It's not related to the Catholic News Service, the official news outlet of the U.S. bishops.

Last week, both the Catholic Health Association and the U.S. bishops held plenary assemblies for the first time since the fierce national debate over health care reform, which saw the two groups at odds because of differing conclusions about the legislation's impact on abortion.

My story on the CHA assembly, combined with a phone interview with George from St. Petersburg, can be found here: <http://ncronline.org/news/politics/minding-gap-between-bishops-and-catholic-health-care>. The bottom line was that neither side is backing down from their substantive positions, but both say they want to overcome the gap.

In the wake of the bishops' gathering, the Catholic News Agency also ran a story reporting on what

George had told the bishops, citing unnamed sources in the meeting. Among other things, the story quoted George as referring to "so-called Catholic groups" that supported health care reform, suggesting that the CHA had created a "parallel magisterium" to the bishops, and asserting that a meeting between CHA officials and three bishops appointed by George had "frustrating results."

In a June 21 posting on the blog of the bishops' conference, Helen Osman, Secretary of Communications for the conference, asserted that those quotations are "just wrong." Osman said she was in the room during the discussion, and that she had checked an audio file of the meeting to confirm her memory.

"There's certainly plenty of disagreement between the bishops and the Catholic health care organizations regarding the implications of the health care legislation," Osman wrote. "But to confuse the situation with quotes that aren't true is just plain dishonest."

Osman also criticized CNN for an on-line report based in part on the CNA story. A June 16 story from CNN.com combined elements from my report and the CNA story under the headline, "Bishops' conference blasts nuns for health care endorsement."

Osman said it was a "huge and erroneous assumption" to frame the health care debate as a standoff between the bishops and sisters.

In reply to Osman's post, CNA posted an item the same day saying the agency "stands by its report," asserting that it had been corroborated by "several bishops." Alejandro Bermudez, editor of the CNA, called upon Osman to release the audio file of the St. Petersburg discussion "to see who is right," calling her post "disturbing, dishonest and unfairly selective."

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In her posting, Osman said the conference would not release the audio file in order "to honor the bishops' privacy and confidentiality."

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In the CNA reply to Osman, Bermudez also refers to my interview with George as "validating" the agency's report, based on quotations published in my June 16 article. Because that interview has become relevant not only to the tensions between the bishops and the CHA, but also those between the conference and the Catholic News Agency, I am posting here the full text of the conversation. It took place by telephone on the morning of June 16.

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Interview with Cardinal Francis George

June 16, 2010

What's at stake in the tension between the bishops and the CHA?

A central point seems to be the idea that making a judgment about a law is a purely political matter in which the bishops shouldn't be involved, and ultimately I don't think that can be sustained. If the bishops have a right and a duty to teach that killing the unborn is immoral, they also have to teach that laws which permit and fund abortion are immoral. That's clear in *Evangelium Vitae* and the whole corpus of Catholic social teaching. Law is normative. It talks about what is right and wrong to do, at least legally, and so it enters into a moral universe.

Where someone draws the line on what the bishops ought to say, I think, often depends on where they're coming from politically. As you know, some argued that the bishops shouldn't be saying that health care reform is a moral imperative — that this was a political question in which we shouldn't be involved. Striking the right balance is a pastoral challenge, and I think we tried to do our best to stay on the level of principle, without getting into the arcane policy details which are not our prerogative.

The principle involved in the health care debate is that a good society is one in which everybody is cared for, and nobody is deliberately killed. Once you get into that, you have to look at the way the law is written, which in this case focused on insurance. That's not the only way to guarantee care, but it's how this law is crafted. The Hyde Amendment stipulated that the federal government will not fund insurance policies that provide abortion, and our concern was to be sure the same protection was in this bill.

The CHA's argument is that they're not questioning your right to offer moral judgments about law. Instead, they're saying that you're wrong about what this law contains.

I can see that there could be a question about the empirical content of the law, and different lawyers have said different things. So far, nobody has answered the objections raised by Anthony Picarello, the bishops' counsel, in his letter to *America* magazine [an edited version of the letter appeared in the May 17 issue of *America*; the full text is available on the USCCB web site]. What worries me more than a difference over empirical content, however, is the claim that the bishops cannot speak to the moral content of the law. That seems to be what the CHA has said, though I'd be happy to be proven wrong.

Are you hopeful about overcoming the rift with the CHA?

Yes, I am. I've written to Sr. Carol [Keehan, president of the CHA], and I want us to try to reshape the relationship in dialogue together. The bishops have to protect their role to govern the church, but within that, there are lots of conversation places. As part of that conversation, we have to clarify the claims being made, primarily on this question of our role in assessing the moral quality of law, because it affects every area we touch on. For example, it affects our discussion of immigration. Are we supposed to just say that the present situation is morally unjustified, or do we have the right and the duty to make moral judgments about whatever legislation comes down the line?

Is it possible that the CHA will face disciplinary measures?

I'm not sure what that would look like, because we haven't talked about it as a conference. In any event, the disciplinary code of the church is actually quite restricted. The Code of Canon Law was revised under John Paul II, and I think he had seen the misuse of administrative penalties in Communist countries and didn't want the church's code misused in the same way.

Are you hoping that things never get to that stage because efforts at dialogue bear fruit?

Of course. We're dealing with people of good will here, so dialogue should be possible.

Can you say anything about your discussion in St. Petersburg on the health care reform debate?

This assembly is basically a retreat, so the discussion took up less than an hour at the beginning. Some bishops gave a report on the dialogue as it went along, and we talked about some policies. That's really all we did — there were no resolutions or decisions.

Earlier in the year you appointed Bishops Kevin Vann, Thomas Paprocki and Kevin Rhoades to meet with the leadership of the CHA. Do you see that group as the vehicle to carry the dialogue forward?

tIt would be the normal vehicle for that to happen, or the dialogue could go into some existing body within the conference, such as the domestic policy committee. We have to talk about which way is better, and perhaps the CHA will have some impression of which is better. I think the group [composed of the three bishops and three officials from CHA] has proven itself to be helpful, but we?ll have to see whether they want to continue.

From your point of view, is this ultimately an ecclesiological question ? who speaks for the church?

tYes, exactly. Our disagreement may be narrow, but it?s a narrow difference that has exposed a very large principle. It affects the nature of the church, and therefore it has to concern the bishops.

tI know this comparison may seem dramatic, but a few years ago Cardinal von Galen of Munster [Germany] was beatified. Under the Nazis, von Galen not only condemned euthanasia as an unethical procedure, but he also condemned the laws which permitted it. Today we think of him as a hero, and rightly so. This is the question that has to be raised: Are we to offer moral teaching solely about actions, or also the laws which permit and foster them?

Where do you see potential for putting the relationship between the bishops and the CHA back on solid footing?

tOne immediate area of possible collaboration is the effort to put the language of the Hyde Amendment back into the law, now that we actually have a law. If we can jointly support that change to the law, it would go a long way toward fostering reconciliation.

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