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Despite Phoenix dispute, bishops, CHA ties strong

by John L. Allen Jr.



Cardinal Daniel N. DiNardo of Galveston-Houston smiles during an informal news conference at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' headquarters in Washington Jan. 25. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

ANALYSIS

On a scale of predictability, today's tensions between the U.S. bishops and the Catholic Health Association would probably rank with the rising of the sun. Last year the bishops and the association, which represents America's Catholic hospitals, were on opposite sides of the health care reform debate, and new fault lines have erupted over a member hospital in Phoenix accused of performing a direct abortion.

In that light, the real story probably is not that the relationship has been strained. Instead, it's that several leading American prelates insist their ties with the association, despite everything, remain fundamentally strong.

The back-and-forth between the association and the American bishops may thus hold lessons for how other parties in the church can keep lines of communication open, even in the teeth of disagreements on highly contentious questions.

In recent weeks, four bishops -- including the past and current presidents of the U.S. bishops' conference, the chair of the bishops' pro-life committee, and a bishop who sits on the Catholic Health Association board -- have told *NCR* that they're optimistic about the future of relations with the association.

"We're all in this together," said Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a mid-January interview.

"It's not that the CHA is working on the side of the hospitals, while the bishops are trying to preserve a pure morality because it's being chipped away," Dolan said. "Philosophically, we're on the same page."

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, Dolan's predecessor as conference president, struck a similar note.

"I think the conversation with the CHA is moving along quite well," he said in early January, adding that in his conversations with Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, president of the association, she raised "good questions" and expressed "openness" to keeping the relationship on track.

Bishop Kevin Vann of Fort Worth, Texas, who chaired a three-bishop ad hoc committee for dialogue with the association after the health care reform debate, and who now sits on the CHA board, told *NCR* that he's been in conversation with the association as recently as Jan. 23.

"It's important we continue to work together," Vann said.

One factor fueling rapprochement, observers say, is the fact that the association has joined the bishops in supporting legislation in the new session of Congress intended to strengthen provisions barring federal funding for abortion. (The bills include the Protect Life Act, the Abortion Non-Discrimination Act, and the No Taxpayer Funding for Abortion Act, all sponsored by pro-life members in the House of Representatives.)

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Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, who chairs the bishops' Pro-Life Committee, said Jan. 25 it's a "very positive" development that the Catholic Health Association is working with the bishops on these bills, and that he believes the bishops and the association "are on a good path."

DiNardo said he has "no reason not to be confident" that the bishops and the association will stick together as congressional debate unfolds.

Observers credit Keehan with investing significant time and energy in behind-the-scenes exchanges with bishops, helping to avoid what might have been an even more damaging public crossfire.

George and DiNardo both said they've had "good conversations" with Keehan, and Dolan said she's left a favorable impression with him too.

"I'm convinced that Sr. Carol believes she serves the bishops as much as she serves the hospitals," Dolan said.

Keehan's response to the Phoenix situation, in which Bishop Thomas Olmsted revoked the Catholic status of a hospital belonging to the Catholic Healthcare West system, is a case in point. While she and the association obviously disagree with Olmsted's finding, Dolan said, they have accepted Olmsted's

authority to make that decision.

‘She feels very strongly that the decision was terrible, but she knows that the bishop of the diocese is the authentic interpreter and implementer’ of the U.S. bishops’ ‘Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services,’ Dolan said.

‘She wholeheartedly believes that, and CHA believes that,’ he said.

None of this is to suggest that a new era of good feelings is necessarily about to dawn. Some observers warn the Phoenix case could be a harbinger of fierce new battles over the Catholic identity of health care facilities.

‘The worry is that our Catholic hospitals are now where our universities were back in the 1980s, slowly drifting out of the Catholic orbit,’ Dolan said, adding that he would be willing to see other Catholic facilities cut ties with the church if it meant ‘defending the integrity’ of Catholic health care.

As those dramas unfold, the Catholic Health Association and the bishops may once again find themselves at loggerheads. For now, however, they’re still talking -- and in today’s polemical climate, both in America and in the church, that alone might qualify as a minor miracle.

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