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White House insists contraception talks are on track

David Gibson Religion News Service | Mar. 6, 2012

Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan of New York waves as he arrives on stage to give his presentation at the annual Diocese of Rockville Centre, N.Y., Public Policy Convocation at Holy Trinity Diocesan High School in Hicksville, N.Y., March 3. (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)

The Obama administration is rejecting charges by the nation's top Catholic bishop that talks to modify a controversial birth control mandate are "going nowhere" because of alleged White House intransigence and efforts to diminish the central role of the bishops.

"The White House has put nearly every issue requested by the bishops on the table for discussion and has sought the views of bishops on resolving difficult policy problems, only to be rebuffed," an administration official close to the negotiations said Tuesday.

The official was not authorized to speak publicly on the negotiations and requested anonymity to speak candidly about the sensitive talks.

"Unfortunately, it appears that some bishops and staff are more interested in the politics of this issue than resolving any underlying challenges faced by Catholic social service providers. Nonetheless, the administration is still hopeful we can find a solution to the most pressing issues."

The official was responding to statements made by New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a March 2 letter to his fellow bishops and in a blog post he wrote about talks between the White House and the bishops.

Facing escalating criticism for the narrow religious exemption in regulations that require employers to offer free contraception coverage to employees, President Obama last month proposed an "accommodation" that would significantly broaden the exemption for faith-based institutions.

The compromise sought to avoid most of the problems for religious employers who have moral objections by requiring insurance companies, rather than the employer, to provide and pay for contraception coverage as a separate policy.

Religious groups, led by the Catholic bishops, dismissed the proposal as an "accounting gimmick" that did not solve the problem.

The White House invited the bishops, as well as representatives of religiously affiliated hospitals, universities and social service agencies, to talks to work out the details of the accommodation to ensure it would pass muster with those groups, most of which are Catholic.

Given the history of tension between the nation's Catholic bishops and the Obama administration, few expected the talks to easily resolve the problems. By making his criticism both public and pointed, Dolan signaled that the bishops were not optimistic about getting what they wanted.

Dolan depicted White House negotiators as highhanded in meetings with USCCB staffers, and said administration officials "think we bishops simply do not know or understand Catholic teaching."

"So, I don't know if we'll get anywhere with the executive branch," Dolan said, arguing that the hierarchy would do better to look to Congress and the courts for remedies. On March 1, the Senate rejected a bill that would exempt religious groups from the insurance mandate.

Church officials familiar with the negotiations privately noted that some USCCB staff members involved in the talks are veteran culture warriors who worked at places like the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and often take a harder line than the bishops themselves.

Talks with Catholic officials from other institutions are reportedly proceeding more quickly than discussions with the bishops. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, a Catholic who championed the original contraception mandate, has indicated that the administration hopes to have a revised rule ready "in the near future."

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