

Bishops battling abortion in reform package

Congress takes sides on issue

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — When the U.S. bishops last week threw down the gauntlet to Congress on mandated abortion coverage in health care reforms, the responses were quick and predictable.

Within hours after the bishops voted July 13 to oppose any plan that requires abortion coverage, more than 65 members of Congress said they would be just as likely to dig in their heels against any legislation that does not include abortion and contraceptive services in its mandated benefits package.

House Democratic Whip David E. Bonior, a Catholic from Michigan, predicted that 35 to 40 House Democrats would heed the bishops' call to oppose any health care measures that include

abortion coverage. He is reportedly working behind the scenes on a proposal that would include universal coverage and give employees a choice on whether their health plans should cover abortion, a plan that might satisfy no one.

White House health care spokeswoman Lorrie McHugh said the Clinton administration "will fight for" the inclusion of abortion coverage, but said the decision is ultimately up to Congress.

The bishops — who have often outlined their criteria for health care reform but have never backed a specific piece of legislation on the topic — were firm in their call to Congress.

"Now is the time for congressional leadership to rise above partisan and special-interest pressures and to bring to the floor comprehensive health care reform that will assure decent coverage for all and will not force Americans to participate in the destruction of unborn children," said a July 13 letter from three Catholic leaders to House Speaker Thomas S. Foley, D-Wash.

"There is much talk of compromise these days," added the letter from Archbishop William H. Keeler of Baltimore, president of the bishops' conference; Cardinal Roger M. Mahony of Los Angeles, chairman of the bishops' pro-life committee; and Auxiliary Bishop John H. Ricard of Baltimore, chairman of the domestic policy committee.

"We write to say as clearly as we can that compromise must not come at the expense of unborn, the unserved, the undocumented and the uninsured."

Bishop Ricard said none of the four major bills now before Congress meets the bishops' requirements on universal coverage or the exclusion of abortion.

Criticizing the current health system "that serves too few and costs too much," Bishop Ricard urged members of Congress "not to cave in to the powerful economic interests on universal coverage or to the abortion lobby on abortion coverage."

"We cannot compromise on this," said Bishop James T. McHugh of Camden,

N.J., a member of the bishops' pro-life committee. "Abortion must be excluded."

But equally aggressive statements were coming from those on the other side of the abortion question.

"We feel compelled to convey to you our strong commitment that any health care reform package that comes before the House must contain coverage for contraceptive and abortion services if it is to gain our support," said a letter to Foley from 68 House members.

"That is not negotiable, it is not discussable, it is not compromisable," said one of the signers, Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y. "We're saying there's a hard line here. There will not be a health care bill without abortion coverage, period."

"Some of my colleagues threaten a fight if abortion remains in a final health care plan," said Rep. Peter A. DeFazio, D-Ore. "I guarantee a fight if it is taken out."

But everyone agrees that the weeks before the expected congressional recess in mid-August will be critical in shaping the final version of health care reform, if such reform is to receive approval before the November elections.

Public opinion seems to be on the side of the bishops, although their opponents claim otherwise.

A poll commissioned by the bishops and released July 13 showed that although 70 percent of Americans support universal coverage, the inclusion of abortion coverage in all the major plans currently under consideration in Congress erodes overall support for any reforms.

Forty-nine percent of the respondents said they would oppose health care reform "if it required that abortions for any reason must be covered by every insurance policy," while 38 percent said they would favor reform under those circumstances. The rest were undecided or said their response would depend on other factors.

An even higher percentage — 65 percent — said they would oppose health care reform "if it required that coverage of abortions for any reason be taxpayer-subsidized."

Mission members expelled



AP/Wide World Photos

A member of the Organization of the American States/United Nations Mission to Haiti wipes his eye aboard a bus that took mission members to the Port-au-Prince airport under Haitian police escort. The mission's foreign members, about 90 in all, were charged with monitoring the state of human rights in Haiti. They were expelled by the government for performing 'subversive activities.'

CRS in Rwanda

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some really serious assistance" he said, the agency should not go "just to wave the CRS flag."

Hennemeyer said one psychological effect of the bloodshed and massacre of the war in Rwanda has been to leave many people with the feeling "that the church has really failed."

People have the sense that the faith never really took root in the country or, they ask themselves "how could all this happen?"

But there also is optimism among some that the nation can be rebuilt and the ethnic split healed, he said.

A new government backed by the

mostly Tutsi minority rebel movement was to be sworn in July 19 with a president and vice president from the Hutu group.

"People go out of their way to say this was not an ethnic war," he said. While that may be wishful thinking, he said, it indicates a willingness to attempt reconciliation.

Hennemeyer said there is evidence that the split along ethnic lines is not absolute.

He described a dinner the night before with a Rwandan Tutsi colleague at which one of the guests was a Hutu.

The Tutsi had lost his wife and children to Hutu killers.

But he and the Hutu man had been friends from childhood, Hennemeyer said, "and remain so."

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