

WORLD & NATION

Catholic leaders protest ACLU conscience report

By Nancy Frazier O'Brien
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Catholic leaders strongly objected to a new report that claims women's lives are put at risk by conscience clauses permitting Catholic hospitals to refuse to perform certain medical procedures on religious grounds.

The report by the American Civil Liberties Union's Reproductive Freedom Project was released Jan. 22, the 29th anniversary of the Roe vs. Wade decision legalizing abortion.

Titled "Religious Refusals and Reproductive Rights," the report stated: "As more hospitals are managed by religious entities and more states adopt broad refusal clauses allowing health care providers to deny treatment on the basis of religious or moral objections, more women are harmed and more physicians find themselves thwarted in their efforts to care for their patients."

"You have to remember that abortion is an elective procedure" that is rarely performed on an emergency basis, said Cathleen Cleaver, director of information and planning for the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities. "But this notion

that women's lives are in jeopardy (because of conscience clauses) is ridiculous."

"Where there are circumstances when women's lives are threatened, no Catholic hospital is going to turn away" the patient, Cleaver told Catholic News Service Jan. 22. But no hospital should have to perform services that violate the religious tenets on which it was founded, she added.

Father Michael D. Place, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association, said the report "leaves the false impression that Catholic health care gets funds it isn't entitled to."

"There's no rule that any hospital that receives government funds should provide every service," he said.

The ACLU report contends that health-care providers should not have unlimited access to conscience-clause protections.

"For example, whatever their religious or moral scruples, doctors and other health professionals should give complete and accurate information and make appropriate referrals," it said.

The report also implied that the only health care institutions that should be allowed to use the conscience clause are religious institutions exclusively serving members of their own religion, such as Christian Science sanatoriums.

"When, however, religiously affiliated organizations move into secular purposes — such as providing medical care or social services to the public or running a business — they should no longer be insulated from secular laws," the ACLU said.

Although much of the report focused on abortion, it also raised such issues as emergency contraception for rape victims, contraceptive sterilization, distribution of



Reuters/CNS

Perspective on violence

A man walks Jan. 27 past a new mural depicting a scene from the 1972 Bloody Sunday riots in the Catholic Bogside estate of Londonderry, Northern Ireland. Thousands will take part in a Feb. 3 remembrance ceremony marking the 30th anniversary of Bloody Sunday. British troops opened fire on a civil rights march Jan. 30, 1972, killing 13 unarmed Catholics and wounding others.

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Both Cleaver and Father Place noted that the report raised many of the same objections previously made by Catholics for a Free Choice, a group the U.S. bishops have said "merits no recognition or support as a Catholic organization" and is funded mostly by non-Catholic sources.

"Their ultimate objective is that abortion be on demand in every hospital in the United States," Father Place said. "They will pick whatever method will contribute incrementally to that goal."

Cleaver said the ACLU and other groups want to force Catholic institutions "to provide and pay for abortions."

"But that's never going to happen; it's a

losing proposition," she said. "The ACLU has a lot of resources and could be doing a lot of good with those resources. But this is not money well spent."

Along with the report, the ACLU released figures from a survey last summer in which 83 percent of respondents agreed somewhat or strongly that a hospital receiving government funds "should be required to provide basic, legal medical services, regardless of the hospital's religious objections."

In addition, 89 percent of the respondents said they opposed allowing insurance companies to refuse to pay for medical services on religious grounds; 86 percent opposed permitting employers to refuse to provide health insurance coverage for medical services to which employers object on religious grounds; and 88 percent said they did not think pharmacies should be able to refuse to fill prescriptions they object to on religious grounds.

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