

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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CHURCH ROLE IN POLICY DEBATES PROTECTED BY CONSTITUTION

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

Catholics are deeply involved in the debate over health care reform. Led by the bishops, acting through the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Catholics have pressed three major points: 1) health care should be accessible to all; 2) abortion is not health care and government funds should not pay for it; and 3) immigrants should have access to health care.

These positions should surprise no one. The bishops have embraced the idea that all Americans should have access to affordable health care since 1919. And the bishops have consistently opposed funding abortion and supported humane policies for immigrants.

Some who do not share these views try to discredit them. They suggest that religiously based advocacy has no place in policy debates. They argue that such advocacy violates the Constitution and is an example of religious intrusion into government.

In making such an argument, they misread the Constitution and deny people of faith a place in public debate that is rightfully theirs.

Nothing in the Constitution bars churches from participating in public policy arguments. Indeed, such participation has a long history. This is because our ancestors understood that political issues with moral implications do not become matters of religious doctrine just because people of faith join the debate. Were that the case, debates over slavery, the death penalty, preemptive war, or the denial of civil rights to racial minorities, would have been off limits to churches and religious leaders.

Whether public funds should be used for a procedure that terminates human life is a policy issue with moral implications. So is the question of whether all people have a moral claim on affordable health care. Religiously based arguments have every right to be heard in these discussions.

Those who oppose the Catholic presence in the debate over health care should ponder where that argument leads them. For, if one accepts the view that policy matters with moral dimensions are off limits for debate, one can then argue that we should not debate health care reform at all.

On the question of funding for abortion, Catholics merely affirm the proposition that public funds should not be used to purchase abortion services. This is current law and has been since Congress approved the Hyde amendment in the mid-1970s. Catholics are not alone in that view,

and the bishops were not alone in pressing the case for the Stupak amendment, which bars the use of federal funds for abortion in health care plans.

The Stupak amendment did not prevail because the Catholic Church donates large sums of money to candidates. The Church does none of that. Nor did it prevail because the bishops imposed a narrow view on a majority. It prevailed because the case against public funding of abortion remains a compelling one to many, including some who are pro-choice.

Those who are unhappy with our Catholic involvement in this debate are not really unhappy because our advocacy violates the Constitution. They are unhappy because, to this point, such advocacy has been persuasive.

The First Amendment permits that – even for Catholics.

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