

Bishops oppose 'hard-hearted' line on immigrants in health care debate

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 17, 2009 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Six Hispanic bishops visited Congress today to press an agenda featuring health care, immigration reform, education, housing, and anti-poverty efforts. Most immediately, the bishops argued that any health care reform package should offer coverage for immigrants, including the nation's estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants.

Any reasonable reform has to include the immigrant community, including some kind of safety net for undocumented immigrants," said Bishop Jaime Soto of Sacramento, Calif.

If we leave out that segment of society, it will not only affect them but it will prejudice the health of American society in general," Soto said, insisting that it would be "foolish and hard-hearted" to exclude immigrants from the health care system.

Soto said the bishops have recently picked up "conversations" about moves in Congress to deny undocumented immigrants the ability to pay out-of-pocket for their own health care, a possibility Soto described as "more a matter of a runaway anti-immigrant rhetoric rather than common sense approach to health care."

Soto and Archbishop Jose Gomez of San Antonio discussed their visits to Capitol Hill today in an early afternoon media briefing. Gomez chairs the U.S. bishops' Committee on Cultural Diversity, while Soto chairs a subcommittee on the Church in Latin America.

Both Gomez and Soto are considered important points of reference for the Hispanic Catholic community.

In recent weeks, a handful of American bishops have issued statements critical of expanding government bureaucracy in health care, warning that it could violate the Catholic principle of "subsidiarity," meaning that higher levels of authority should not usurp functions that can be performed better at lower levels. Some analysts have taken that to suggest ambivalence among the bishops about a so-called "public option."

Gomez, however, said that the bishops' main concern is with "universal access," as well as the protection of human life from conception to natural death.

The details as to whether we should have a thoroughly private system or some kind of public system, I think that's a matter for policy people to struggle with," Soto said, adding that the bishops approached the debate as "pastors and teachers."

On the abortion front, Gomez said the bishops were "encouraged by the statement of President Obama last week that federal funds will not be used for abortions and about the protection of conscience clauses." Gomez said that the bishops "will support a bill that includes those ideas from the President."

Aside from health care, the Hispanic bishops also pressed the urgency of comprehensive immigration reform. Gomez said he was impressed that members of Congress do seem to want to move on immigration, though Soto conceded that sometimes they have a "short attention span" and "can only focus on one critical issue at a time."

Soto argued that health care and immigration are related concerns.

"Unless we have comprehensive [immigration] reform, we will be dealing with the consequences of failures in the immigration system, not only in health care but in other areas as well," he said.

Soto insisted that immigrants are "contributing to the prosperity of America," and that "their efforts are as much a stimulus package as anything else in this country."

Hispanics are estimated to constitute roughly one-third of the 70 million Catholics in the United States, and according to a recent Pew Forum study, that share should rise to 41 percent by the year 2030. By that stage, white non-Hispanics will, for the first time, no longer be a majority among American Catholics.

The other bishops taking part in today's visits were:

Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, New Mexico

Bishop James Tamayo of Laredo, Texas

Bishop Carlos Sevilla of Yakima, Washington

Auxiliary Bishop Edgar Da Cunha of Newark, New Jersey

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