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Immigrants & Health Care

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 14, 2009 NCR Today

The USCCB?s most recent statement on health care stated that the bishops could not lend their support to the current health care legislation because, in part, it fails to take account of the needs of immigrants. In the current political climate, no health care proposal is likely to cover undocumented immigrants and even those who have documents are made to suffer under murky limitations.

While most of the attention in the Catholic community and among the bishops has been focused on the provisions respecting abortion, the bishops are right to raise their voices on behalf of immigrants. Indeed, there is something to be said for the bishops never endorsing any proposals except to ask, ?But what about the needs of these people?? Human laws, like human lives, fall short of the Kingdom of God and the Church has a unique role in reminding our culture of that fact.

That said, I hope the bishops recognize that a society that takes care of more people than previously because of a piece of legislation is to be applauded for doing so. Indeed, a society that recognizes health care as a right due to its citizens is more like to come to the recognition that health care is a right due to all people, be they citizens or not.

Similarly, if the final legislation does not permit federal funding for abortion, but maintains the current practice of permitting people to deduct health care costs, including the costs of an abortion, or permits subsidies for policies that cover abortion which the individual chooses, the bishops should support the legislation as a step forward on health care even while it is neutral on abortion. There is a difference between federal funding of abortion and providing subsidies for policies that individuals choose, and the difference is between cooperating with evil and not so cooperating.

Just because a health care bill is not perfect does not mean it will not be an improvement. If, on the other hand, the bishops wish to say that their position is always to show how legislation falls short of the ideal, that works too. But, they have to be explicit and recognize that they are changing their usual posture. Neither stance is likely to gain funding for immigrants. Neither stance is likely to make health reform become a vehicle for limiting abortion. But, the integrity of the Church?s teaching is at stake here. Anytime the bishops end up opposing legislation that extends health care coverage the Church views as a basic human right, they should be worried. Only the gravest of reasons should justify the bishops opposing the health care reform effort.

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